

I remember back when we were getting college catalogs in our mailbox – tons of them. Not sure colleges do that anymore – probably just an onslaught of emails. But I remember so many of those colleges promised, “We prepare you for the real world.” Quite a claim for a college, “we prepare you for the real world.” One of the difficulties of this claim is that it implies we have some sort of consensus on just what the real world actually is. It implies that “the real world” is a fixed, agreed upon thing rather than something about which there is a lot of disagreement across the world.

For example, a Buddhist might say that reality consists of suffering and just managing to survive and ought to be escaped through a process of enlightenment. Sigmund Freud said that “Obscure, unfeeling, and unloving powers determine human fate.” Thomas Hobbes, English philosopher who lived from 1588-1679, believed that people act only from selfish desires and that the reality of human life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” – though he did himself live to be 91.

One of the requirements in seminary for Presbyterian pastors back when I was under care of my presbytery was a unit of what is called Clinical Pastoral Education. Seminarians work for a summer full-time or during the school year on a part-time basis as a chaplain in a hospital. I worked as a chaplain in a state psychiatric hospital in Connecticut that is now closed. Each of the chaplaincy students was assigned to an acute care ward and a chronic care ward where people mostly lived there for the rest of their lives. One of the goals in the chronic care ward was a kind of reality therapy – to keep reminding the patients of the real world – to ask them if they knew who was President of the United States. What year is it? Do you know where you are? Who you are? The idea was to not play along with their confusions and delusions, but to help them get a grip. I have no idea whether this worked or not. It seemed to me that some people could usually answer the questions, and other people rarely could. My asking them and reminding them didn’t appear to make any difference. Besides, I wasn’t sure it was really all that useful to some of those folks. I remember one very elderly woman, exasperated with my questions, said, “Look honey, I’m old. I don’t feel so good. I don’t really care what day it is or who is President.” And you know, she had a point. It wasn’t that she was especially delusional;

she just lived in a world in which those things didn't matter. Every day in the hospital was the same and the President would not be coming to visit. What mattered was whether the lunch would be edible and whether anyone would steal her shoes while she was sleeping. Her reality was not actually the same as my reality. Her world required her to behave in ways that were different from what I needed to be doing and my assumption that we lived in the same world was pretty useless to her.

Our view of reality is going to influence, sometimes even determine, how we are going to act. How you live in the world is related to what sort of world you think we live in. I suspect most of us are pretty practical about how we live. Most people live on the basis of simply "what works" and not in relation to an idea or an ideal. We make choices based on the options we perceive to be in front of us. Our ethics are in response to the situation we believe we are in. Theologians however, argue that when we think of ethics this way, when we make our choices about how we are going to live – say or do - prompted only by what is immediately before us, that isn't really ethics at all. It isn't really exerting any personal influence at all. It is just what people say, "it was the only thing I could do, considering the circumstances" and what is real, the real world, can be only the world as it is right in front of us. If the world is, as Hobbes said, indeed "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" then what one person calls lack of compassion, might be to someone else, "the only thing I could do, considering the circumstances." Many of the brutalities in history were explained later by the perpetrators saying, "I had no choice."

Lots of people have said as their main objection to Christianity is that it is "not real" – that the called Christian life just doesn't match up with the facts of the world around us. For example, "I love the idea of Jesus' compassion and "turn the other cheek and all that" but it doesn't really deal with the real world." Or, "well, all that Jesus stuff is all well and good, but sometimes you just have to get real."

Few Bible passages are as "unreal" as the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who mourn. When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. If someone commands you to carry his burden for one mile, go a second mile. Sounds like a recipe for being a full-time door mat. And it sounds that way because we know what we think of as the real world. In the real world, if someone hits you on the right

cheek, and you offer the left, you end up with two bruised cheeks. If a soldier orders you to carry his burden for a mile, as a Roman soldier at the time was entitled to demand, and you agree to carry it for two miles, then you'll probably end up carrying it for ten. In the real world, the meek get taken advantage of. Those who are wronged get a lawyer.

If the Beatitudes weren't so familiar, and we came across it for the first time, I think we'd probably think there must be typos in that part of the Bible. Maybe it should be "blessed are those who are born instead of mourn" or even the Monty Python version, "blessed are the cheesemakers" or blessed are the placemakers" – surely not "blessed are the peacemakers." Or blessed are those who seek" or "blessed are those at the peak" – surely not "blessed are the meek." Especially since the Greek word for "blessed" is *makarios* which just means "happy." "Happy are those who mourn?" Surely not. The Sermon on the Mount doesn't seem to be talking about anything that is really real – certainly not "the real world."

The Beatitudes are counter-intuitive. They don't fit our immediate experience. After all, in what way does being meek or persecuted or in mourning feel blessed or happy? It doesn't. To be reviled and persecuted because you are a Christian might turn out to be a blessing, but it is not going to make you feel especially cheerful or happy. In what world could that be true?

The blessing of the Beatitudes is not really about us in the sense that it is not about how we feel. It is really about what God has done for us. When Jesus was teaching the disciples he was telling those former fishermen that they were blessed because they were experiencing the coming of the Kingdom of God and were in the process of discovering that their lives were being reshaped by a new reality, a new world. No longer would the meaning of life be defined by the culture of the town of Capernaum, or the expectations of their families, or the size of the fish they pulled out of the Sea of Galilee. From the arrival of Jesus on, the dominant reality in their existence, their world, would be the kingdom of God and the blessing of God that would come to everyone who made a place for the kingdom in their lives.

If this world were only a veil of tears, and life were only solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short, then mourning and grief are pretty much the only option. The best we could hope for is getting really good at grief. But Jesus promises laughter to those who mourn, blessings on those who are victims of injustice, triumph to those who do not repay evil for evil.

So how does this work? It works because Jesus saw a new world coming. Jesus himself was the beginning of the new world, the first outbreak of the kingdom of God, the sign that God was doing something altogether new. In Christ – in his life, his death, his resurrection, this new world began.

Some people think that Christianity is all about getting ready to leave this cold cruel world for another world – that Christian faith is how we get a ticket to heaven, a passport to eternal life. And it is true that Jesus is talking in the Sermon on the Mount in the future tense – about what will be true. The whole new world he is describing isn't all the way here yet. There is still plenty of the old world around for people to think it's the only one there is.

But then Jesus switches to the present tense. What we do here, what we do now, matters in the new world. Every time we forgive; every time we turn the other cheek, every time we overcome the temptation to return evil for evil, we demonstrate our citizenship in the new reality, the new world that Jesus has brought - not only our citizenship, but our contribution to the making of this new world. A little piece of God's new world is not only visible, but real, alive, in us. And that is the blessing we experience.

Jesus sits down with all of us who are suffering in some way – grief, the burden of too much work and worry, the madness of injustice – and conducts reality therapy with us. He asks us, “What day is it?” And our faith teaches us to answer, “today is Sunday; today the whole world changed 1987 years ago when God began a new world with Jesus' resurrection. To the next question, “Who are you?” we answer, “I am a sinner, a forgiven sinner, a beloved child of God, a citizen, by virtue of my baptism, of God's new world, someone who has learned a new way to live.”

My mother forwarded me an email a while ago called “Interesting Stats.” It said this: if we could shrink the earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all the existing human ratios remaining the same in their 2019 configuration, that village would look something like this:

60 of the people would come from Asia, 10 Europeans, 9 from Latin America, 5 from North America, 16 from Africa

52 would be female and 48 male

33 would be Christian and the rest a mixture of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish, other, and none

6 people would possess 59% of the wealth and all 6 would be from the U.S.
86 would be able to read, 7 would have a college education
15 would have enough to eat; 15 would be overweight and 69 would suffer from malnutrition

These statistics describe most of the world that Hobbes called solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. We know this world exists. But as Christians we also know about the new world that is coming into being – at this point, co-existing with the old one. This new world in which we are already full citizens, a new world in which those who mourn are indeed already comforted, the meek are indeed powerful, where the hungry are filled and those who hunger for justice get it. In this new world we are empowered to turn the other cheek and do all that the Lord requires as the prophet Micah said, “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.” Or, as my mother’s email recommends, Work like you don’t need the money. Love like you’ve never been hurt. Dance like nobody’s watching. Sing like nobody’s listening. Live like it is heaven on earth.

This is what Jesus is doing when he calls us to be his disciples – to live as best we can in the reality of his new world – the kingdom he is bringing into being, the kingdom we participate in, contribute to, when we do justice, when we love kindness, when we walk humbly with our God.

Help us, O God, to face facts, to get real, to admit the truth. But also help us to see how your presence, your words, and your work contest the world’s definitions of what is real, what is true, what are the facts. Then, having seen the real world that you offer us, give us the courage to step up and choose to live there, to be part of your world, your kingdom, your blessed reign where the grieving, the meek, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, the merciful are indeed blessed, happy, joyful. In the name of the one who brought us this new real world, Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen