

Afraid of the Light

Matthew 5.13-16

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GATHERING

As Pastor Anita said last week, there have been a lot of versions of the Beatitudes that help us to see these perhaps too-familiar words in a new way.

One such version was published in 1921 by W. E. B. Du Bois, an African-American historian, sociologist, and one of the founders of the NAACP. He was the first African-American to earn a doctorate at Harvard.

Since we are still in the season of Epiphany with the Wise Ones and all, Du Bois' version of the Beatitudes comes from his imagination about visit of the Magi:

Now when Jesus was born in Benin of Nigeria, in the days of English rule, behold, there came wise men from the East of London ... [after their visit and the presentations of their gifts] And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to England, they departed in to their own country another way.

Save one, and he was black. And his own country was the country where he was; so the black Wise Man lingered by the cradle and the newborn babe. The perfume of his gift rose and filled the house until through it and afar came the dim form of years and multitudes. And the child, seeing the multitudes, opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor folks for they shall go to heaven.

Blessed are sad folks for someone will bring them joy.

Blessed are they that submit to hurts for they shall sometime own the world.

Blessed are they that want to do right for they shall get their wish.

Blessed are those who do not seek revenge for vengeance will not seek them.

Blessed are the pure for they shall see God.

Blessed are those who will not fight for they are God's children.

Blessed are those whom people like to injure for they shall sometime be happy.

Blessed are you, Black Folk, when men make fun of you and mob you and lie about you.

Never mind and be glad for your day will surely come.

Always the world has ridiculed its better souls.

The "day will surely come" when the storm is passing over.

LESSON: Matthew 5.13-16 / SERMON: Afraid Of The Light

¹³"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. ¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Abba in heaven.

I can't think of a better way to respond to this text than to sing: "This little light of mine" and then, to be completely biblical, to sing the second verse, "Hide it under a bushel, NO!"

If only that were true.

When I was a kid, I was afraid of the dark. But as I have grown older, I find myself being more afraid of the light.

Sometimes that fear is about being exposed as an imposter. You know what “imposter syndrome” is? It’s that feeling that you are a fraud. That you don’t deserve accolades. That people think you know what you are doing but you actually don’t and someday they will find out.

To this day, after all the work I did and all the time it took to finish my doctoral program, I still feel a little embarrassed when someone calls me Dr. Phillips, like I’m pretending to be part of a group to which I don’t really have any right to belong.

So sometimes I’m afraid of the light because, if I try to shine it, someone will figure out that I am a fraud.

Sometimes I’m afraid of the light because it might make me see things I don’t want to see. That’s a different kind of exposure.

Sometimes I’m afraid of the light because I know that if I lift that basket, not only might people expose me as a fraud, if it really is my light, I might have claim it. I might have to take responsibility to shine it. And I’d rather the light shine from some other direction so I can hide in the shadows.

I see that the last time I talked about this passage it was 2014. So you remember, of course, that I read the words of Marianne Williamson in her *Course in Miracles*. And whatever you think of her, I think she hits the nail on the head when it comes to this text. She says:

It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us ... Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. [And] It's not just us; [that light] is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Whoever you are and however good you might be at hiding it or however afraid you are of shining it, you are the light of the world. Jesus says so.

I was struck last week by Pastor Anita’s thinking that the Beatitudes are descriptive rather than prescriptive. These blessings are describing the people in the crowd as they are rather than telling them who they ought to be.

Jesus is blessing the poor and the pure and peacemakers and the prophets who are among them and then he says to all of them: “You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.”

As W. E. B. DuBois might say:

Blessed are you poor folks because you have this light to shine on who it is that really goes to heaven.

You sad folks bring to light the real meaning of joy. And let me stop for a minute and say that there are some folks who are really good at being sad. They are sad about everything. There is a beautiful sunset and they are sad that it won’t last. They have this knack for wringing any joy out of most things. They are the ones who, no matter how positive the outcome might look, will say, “It will never work.” It’s a kind of “eeyore syndrome.” DuBois isn’t talking about being sad for the sake of being sad. It’s about the way sadness can bring the meaning of real joy into perspective. It’s about the way it can teach us that

life is not just about superficial “happy talk” or easy answers to someone’s suffering. It’s about shining a light on the path to genuine comfort and deep joy.

You folks who have surrendered to hurt in the process of non-violent resistance, you light the way for real peace with justice. That’s the same for you folks who do not seek vengeance and refuse to fight.

You who are trying so hard to do the right thing will find it complicated and difficult but, if you can see things with the eyes of the pure and simple, they will be a light for that difficult path.

You Black Folks who have been mobbed and lied about and made fun of – you whose history has been robbed from you and kept from us - you shine a light on white privilege and its deadly consequences. It is your light that will bring the dawn of a new day.

You, all of you in our own unique ways, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Father Michael Crosby says that “Matthew’s salt metaphor has its roots in Rabbinic instructions to disciples; ‘to be salted’ means ‘to be wise.’”

You know how we say we are taking some news or idea or assumption with a grain of salt? We mean that we are using some discernment. We are exercising some wisdom about what we hear and see. And Jesus says: You are the grain of salt that sheds light on the world’s behavior and keeps it from simply taking its expectations at face value.

The wisdom you have and the blessing of your unique life are the salt and light of the world.

I have been re-reading Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy*. I haven’t seen the movie yet. But I keep going back to his introduction and how it was that he became such a powerful advocate for those who are incarcerated – especially those on death row. He is, for me, a study in salt and light.

He says that he was a little confused and lost in his early years at Harvard Law School. He couldn’t find his passion. And then he got a summer internship with the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee.

His first assignment was to drive through rural Georgia to meet a prisoner on death row, Henry. When Bryan arrived at the prison, all he could do was apologize: “I’m sorry; I’m sorry; I’m not a real lawyer; I don’t really know very much.”

“What’s going on?” Henry wanted to know.

“We are working on getting you a real lawyer but you’re not at risk of execution anytime in the next year ... I’m just a student but I’m happy to help, if there’s something I can do.”

Bryan says, “Henry stopped the chatter and grabbed my hands.”

“I’m not going to have an execution date anytime in the next year?”

“No, sir.”

“I’m so glad you’re here, and I’m so glad to get this news,” Henry said, “I’ve been talking to my wife on the phone, but I haven’t wanted her to come and visit or bring the kids because I was afraid they’d show up and I’d have an execution date.”

Henry relaxed and for the next three hours they talked and shared stories and laughed and were sad together. Finally the guard came in and told them it was time to go. The guard was rough with Henry as he shackled his ankles and wrists.

Bryan tried to intervene but Henry kept saying, "Don't worry, Bryan, don't worry. Come back, okay?"

Bryan says that he started to mumble, "I'm really sorry. I'm really sorry." But Henry said, "Don't worry ... just come back."

And then Henry did something completely unexpected. He planted his feet to resist the guard's shoving. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes and started to sing:

*I'm pressing on, the upward way
New heights I'm gaining everyday
Still praying as, I'm onward bound
Lord, plant my feet on Higher Ground.*

"It was an old hymn they used to sing all the time in the church where I grew up," Bryan writes, "I hadn't heard it in years ... It took a moment before the officer recovered and resumed pushing Henry out the door," but he kept singing all the way down the hall:

*Lord lift me up and let me stand
By faith on Heaven's tableland
A higher plane, that I have found
Lord, plant my feet on Higher Ground.*

Bryan says that he experienced Henry's song as "precious gift." Whatever fear Bryan brought with him that day, he left with a commitment to not be afraid of his own light. He left committed to take our rigged criminal justice system with a grain of salt – to be that grain of salt.

So, who is the salt and light in this story?

Is it the confused law student who spent most of his time apologizing for what he was not?

Is it Henry on death row whose only good news was that he wasn't going to be executed in the next year and yet found a way to be generous and grateful and to sing that old hymn about being lifted to higher ground?

And what do you think disqualifies you as salt and light?

Is it because you feel confused and lost? You are the light of the world. Don't be afraid. Maybe through you we will find something we didn't know we were looking for.

Is it because you spend most of your time apologizing for what you are not? You are the light of the world. Don't be afraid. Be who you are.

Is it because your time is limited and life is short? You are the light of the world. Don't be afraid. Be gracious and generous with the time you do have. Share laughter and sadness and sing those old songs that are yours to sing.

It's not too late. Because, today, if you hear that voice assuring you that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, don't be afraid and do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

"Imposter Syndrome," is described at www.empowerwork.com. W.E.B. DuBois' "Song from the Cradle," can be found in the collection *Mary Christmas, Baby*, ed. Paula L. Woods & Felix H. Liddell (1996), pp.23-24. Father Michael H. Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Challenge for First World Christians* (Orbis Books, 1989), pp.216-217. Bryan Stevenson *Just Mercy* (Spiegel and Grau, 2014), pp.7-12.