



“The Upside Down Kingdom”

Matthew 5:3-10

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Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Miroslav Volf was a national security threat. He was a young pastor and emerging theologian in communist Yugoslavia. The son of a prominent pastor, he'd been under surveillance his entire life. As an adult married to an American citizen the government assumed he was a CIA spy. Besides, he'd studied theology, a subversive discipline, in the West and written a doctoral dissertation critical of Karl Marx.

In 1983, Volf was drafted into the Yugoslav army. Immediately the surveillance intensified. He discovered that most of the men in his unit were spying on him. His movements were tracked, even photographed. Every conversation was reported.

Soon, months of interrogations began, directed by a General whom Volf calls General G. The information file on Volf was a foot thick. He was charged with sedition and accused of being a spy. For a year the interrogations continued, always accompanied by the threat of prison. Volf felt doomed.

One overwhelming emotion drowned out almost all the others: fear. Sometimes paralyzing fear – fear that makes your body melt, not just your soul tremble. I was firmly held in my interrogators' iron hand and completely dependent on their mercy. They could do with me anything they wanted: and their eyes, as the pummeled me with threats, told me they would relish seeing me suffer. I did not fear so much the threatened imprisonment – I feared the seeming omnipotence of these evildoers. I felt as though a ubiquitous evil eye was watching me, as though an evil mind was twisting for its own purposes what the evil eye saw, as though an evil will was bent on tormenting me. As though a powerful, far-reaching hand lay at the disposal of that will. I was trapped and helpless, with no ground of my own on which to stand. Or from which to resist. Trembling before the false gods of power, I was something all right. But as a person, I was nothing. (*The End of Memory*, p. 9.)

The experience left searing memories. Volf confesses his mind was enslaved to those memories. It seemed, he writes, as if General G. ensconced himself in the middle of the living room of his mind. Volf wondered how to get his interrogator out of his mind or at least to the back porch of his life.

Complicating those memories was Volf's profound faith. Through the entire ordeal he was haunted by Jesus' command to love our enemies. How could he love General G.? How could those memories become a source of healing rather than poisonous resentment and hate?

Now, 20 years later, Volf is the director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture and teaches theology at Yale Divinity School. He's recently written a powerful book on the power of memory entitled *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. The book recognizes that memories have the potential for healing and destruction. The question is how to remember well.

For Volf, the real question is how to recall his memory of evil so his remembering is shaped and formed by faith. His Christian reflections on remembering have, it seems, brought substantial healing to him, and now in written form will bring healing to thousands.

Volf's question is ours: How do we develop a moral framework capable of making sense of life at its worst or its best? To put it another way, how can we learn to experience life Christianly, to think Christianly?

Let me come at that question in a less dramatic way. Glen Stassen is a leading Christian ethicist and a delightful Christian person. One of Glen's good friends says Glen is very much like the kind of person described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Stassen recalls that on his honeymoon, he and his bride were in North Carolina driving along the Blue Ridge Parkway on Sunday morning. They decided to stop at a Baptist Church for worship.

Now I need to add that Glen Stassen is not your ordinary Baptist. He grew up in the Governor's mansion in Minnesota where his father, Harold, was a three-term governor. His father was also the President of the University of Pennsylvania and the President of the American Baptist Convention. This is an Ivy League Baptist!

Well, this little church by the side of the road was in the midst of a special series of meetings. At the front of the church was huge chart that diagrammed the events leading up to the end of the world. The sermon was an explanation of the chart with appropriate threats about the terrifying events about to take place. Stassen was agape with wonder. He'd never seen anything like it.

But there was no guidance about how to conduct your life as a follower of Jesus during those world-ending events. After wondering if this was a sign about his new marriage, Stassen noted that the sermon lacked any guidance regarding how to live in the present. Or how his life could be faithful to the reign of God in his life. How could his new marriage be healing, joy-filled and contribute to God's work of peace and justice in the world?

Stassen tells this story at the beginning of his book, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*. His point – and mine – is that The Sermon on the Mount is a guide for living as a faithful follower of Jesus in our relationships, in our world, in this community. It is the source for a moral foundation on which to build a life.

If so, nothing could be more relevant for people like us. After all, in a world like ours, where will our children, or we adults, go for moral formation? And without a moral foundation how will we live as healing persons in a destructive, often lethal, world? We need help and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount offers it.

Notice where Jesus starts the discussion. It's a crucial first move. When Jesus begins to describe life in the new creation he came to form, he does not begin with a list of demands nor does he begin with a specific moral code. Instead he begins with what we call The Beatitudes. The Beatitudes describe the joy and privileges of living in God's new community.

Each of the Beatitudes and all of them together are not requirements for entrance into God's new world. Rather they are descriptions of Christian character that we are to grow into on the journey of faith. And even more important, the Beatitudes describe the essential character of the new Christian community, a community God intends to be an alternative community.

Jesus makes a critical move at the beginning of his sermon. He makes character, what we are, serve as the foundation of the good life he came to establish. In other words, Jesus is convinced that what we are determines and controls what we do. God's work in us begins with what we are.

That is a basic but often overlooked fact of life. My father, a rock-ribbed Fundamentalist preacher, was wiser than his tradition. Once, to my surprise, he said, "We didn't raise you boys to be Christians. That is your decision to make. We did intend to raise you to be men of character and good citizens." He understood that character determines morality, what we are controls what we do.

A few years later, a friend of Dad's was visiting. I was home from college. My college was a church school with rules and regulations but, at the same time, lots of freedom to determine one's own moral behavior.

Dad's friend sent his son to a notoriously strict college which allows no room for moral freedom. You may have heard of it: Bob Jones University. The school has armed guards. You cannot pass freely into or out of the campus. Dating is strictly monitored by adults in "Dating Parlors." Students are encouraged to report other students for petty infractions like walking on the grass.

"The reason I sent my son to Bob Jones," Dad's friend said, "is so I know where he is on Saturday night."

Dad responded quickly, "I trust my son to know where to be on Saturday night." Now I didn't really deserve Dad's trust, but his comment struck home and, in fact, became part of my moral development. Character determines behavior.

Jesus declares that God is creating a community marked by specific and determinative character. The new community is marked by humility, mercy, peace, peace making, gentleness and a passion for justice. To put it another way, authentic Christian faith and life is first of all an inward reality, a shaping of the soul, not outward appearances.

The crucial foundation stone of our character is the first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Notice that Jesus begins with the what we lack not what we have to offer God or the world. This is no human potential pep talk. The beginning of wisdom, according to Jesus, is a profound sense of dependency, what he calls "poverty of spirit."

We'd like to think we are independent and autonomous. But we're not. When I ate breakfast this morning I was bound by a web of relationships. Someone else grew the wheat that became my toast. A bakery filled with people turned the wheat to bread. A distributor delivered the bread to the grocer where someone put the bread on a shelf. A sales person took my money and I took the bread home to eat. I cannot live a day on my own.

To be human is to be dependent. To love, our greatest need and God's greatest desire for us, is to be dependent on another, indeed radically dependent on another. Faith, trust in God or another person, is dependence. It's a confession we are not on our own and need help to live.

Success is a consequence of our dependence. Successful people certainly have talent and ability which are gifts from our genetic code and God. Success depends on opportunities we cannot control and which are gifts. None of us became successful without others who helped us along the way. All of life and everything in it is in a real sense a gift. And the ultimate source of each gift is God. We are dependent.

The beginning of wisdom and the foundation of a moral life is to recognize our dependence on others and our dependence on God. The Great Commandment, to love God with our entire being and to love our neighbor, is no mere law to obey but the door to real living. To love God and neighbor is an end to independence and the entry into a life of deep dependence.

To be poor in spirit, which is to be properly humble before God and neighbor, is the end of arrogance and the beginning of a refreshing lack of pretense. Spiritual poverty means laying aside our resume and recognizing what's really important.

By the way, any time we think we are important or somebody, we should ask our children. They are seldom impressed by our position and importance. They are impressed by our love, gentleness, mercy and peace. At funerals no one talks about the deceased's accomplishments. But there is much conversation about his or her character. And character begins with deep dependence on God and people.

A contemporary German translation of the New Testament puts the first beatitude this way in English, "Blessed are those who come to God with empty hands." Eugene Peterson's translation offers another helpful alternative, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule."

Such humility is not a burden but an opportunity. A community of dependent people is a refreshing place to be.

Matthew 11:28 is the only place in the gospels in which Jesus describes his inner life. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened down and I will give you rest. For I am humble and gentle in spirit and you will find rest for your souls." The son of God was poor in spirit and that made him a refreshing and restful person.

The consequence of proper humility at the core of our character is profound and transforming. We will be people of rest and refreshment. Each Christian and every Christian Church needs to ask whether or not we are restful and refreshing people.

We can be you know. Such a spirit is a gift given to those who ask. Will we?

Amen.