Prayer: Holy God, your blessings are abundant, and your wisdom exceeds our grasp. Fill us with your Spirit as we hear your word this day, that we may be justice seekers and peacemakers, sharing your life among those who are forgotten, weak or persecuted and revealing to all your glory. Amen.

Last week I marveled at how timely so many of our lectionary passages are. We had our annual congregational meeting, and lo and behold, the epistle text given was Paul’s admonition not to disagree or cause schism, but claim the unity we have in Christ.

This week, not so. It is the day when macho, testosterone-laden gladiators gather in the frozen tundra of New York to do what has been symbolic of so much of America’s history: take as much of the enemy’s land by force. Or, what George Will (a baseball fanatic) said about football: It encompasses the two worst attributes of American life: violence, interrupted by meetings.

And so what is our lectionary text for the day? “Blessed are the poor in Spirit.” “Blessed are the meek.” “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Can you see either of the coaches giving their final instructions to their teams? “Go out there and be meek.” “When you get out on that field, make peace with the other team.”

It’s the Beatitudes, of course. I’ve often found it interesting that with all the attempts to bring the 10 Commandments into courthouses and schools, I never have once heard of an attempt bring the Beatitudes into the public forum. For Clarence Jordan said, “If you want to see the Gospel in working clothes, turn to the Sermon on the Mount,” which begins with the list of those who are blessed.

And a strange group it is. I’m amazed at a phrase that I hear all the time from people who are down and out at More Than A Meal. One woman years ago told this story: “I need some help getting to Atlanta. My daughter was killed in a car accident. Another child is lost to drugs. I had a job, but the factory closed down, and I need to get to my grandchildren.” But there is one phrase that she kept repeating over and over and she would describe one travail after another. With a rhythm as natural as her breathing, she said time and again, “I’ve been blessed.”

The truth of the matter is, by any objective standard, she had been anything but blessed. Let’s call it what it is: She has been through hell, and her words about being “blessed” seem disjointed, disconnected, unreal. And it has taken me years to see, but her comment was not intended to be a response to her economic, personal or social status. It was instead, for her, a deeply theological comment about the nature of life … of her life … in the providence of God.

She reminded me of that old African-American call and response refrain that I have used from time to time. Someone in worship says, “God is good,” and the congregation shouts back “All
“All the time,” the litany goes on, “God is good.” Now, it would not make any sense to say “Life is good … all the time.” Or “everything’s fine … all the time.” But the old refrain does understand that God’s goodness, like God’s blessings, transcends our inability to discern any good in the most dark and difficult times.

I think that’s the theology behind these words of blessing that Jesus speaks in his Beatitudes. They are not bits of conventional wisdom of the world. They are radical assertions about the nature of human life in relationship to God. Jesus is asking his listeners to readjust their way of thinking about reality … about life … about God.

Tom Long asks us to notice the subtle use of the verb tenses in the beatitudes. Each beatitude begins in the present tense: “Blessed are…” In other words, those who are blessed are joyful now, in the present. However, six of the beatitudes offer specific reasons for such blessedness that are not in the present, but the future. What this indicates, he says, is that “the church, the community of Christ, is a joyful people, but the source of their joy is not that they live easy lives in a happy world or that things are getting better every day, but that their trust is in God’s coming kingdom.”

That is to say, the Christian community always sees its life in two frames of reference. First, it sees what everyone else sees—a world of struggle and pain and injustice. Based on such visible evidence, there is not much reason for hope or joy. War follows upon war, violence begets more violence, and the innocent suffer every day. But the church also has a second frame of reference, for it sees what others do not see, that God is at work in this world even today and will surely bring the world to a time of joy and peace. That is what enables people of faith to live in the present, aware that they are blessed, in spite of everything to the contrary.

Now, let’s be clear. This is not some “pie in the sky in the sweet by and by” sort of faith. It is rooted in both the present and the future. Jesus is not inviting us in these beatitudes to become victims. He is not calling us to seek persecution for ourselves, or grief, or poverty of spirit, as though that’s what it will take to earn a place in the Kingdom of God.

Rather, Jesus is offering assurance and strength to those who find themselves in a position of weakness, of poverty, or mourning, or hungering for righteousness. He is assuring those who are in pain, or experiencing deprivation of spirit, or those who find it difficult to follow God’s commands, or those who are broken in any way, that God is with them in the midst of the hurt and the struggle.

Theologian Tom Troeger, a friend and colleague of Barry Oliver’s, says that for those who live beyond the church’s faith, the beatitudes may seem to be nothing more than the absurd delusions of sentimental minds. But to those who have wept in the arms of a sister or brother, to those who have tasted compassion, to those who have committed themselves utterly to God, the beatitudes are the captions to life that reveal a wild, extravagant unceasing love that breaks upon this world from the heart of heaven. In and through our hunger and our sorrow we know what the world cannot figure out: we are blessed.

A few examples: “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus says. The “poor in spirit” are those who experience poverty in many forms. Some you can see, some are hidden. It includes those who
are pushed to the edges of society, who are trampled down economically. They are often forgotten by the world, but they are not abandoned by God.

“Blessed are those who mourn.” This kind of mourning is not just sadness or weeping, but lament over the hurt of the world, which grows out of an awareness of the difference between the world as it is, and the world as God wills it to be.

“Blessed are the meek,” not the timid or passive but those who patiently trust that God will act in due time, content with life’s necessities, insistent upon non-violence in a violent world, taking delight in the comforts of God.

And there are others. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” for a way of life where people are generous with what they have, those who speak for justice in the face of injustice, and who seek to do good for others.

“Blessed are the merciful,” those who show kindness and compassion, who are more eager to forgive than to punish, traits that grow out of a grateful awareness of the mercy of God.

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” those who are what they truly are, not just what they appear to be, people of integrity whose words are backed up by convictions.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” those who seek harmony in human relationships, both personal and corporate, both local and international ... those who seek to “still the storms of human rage.”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for seeking righteousness,” those who want the world to be fair and just and who suffer the consequences of envisioning the world as it should be. The promise for each group is that God will vindicate their sacrifice, will reward the difficulty and danger they encounter in seeking to be faithful.

Over against all the attempts to tame the gospel, over against all the models of the church that seem so prominent in our culture (the church as a religious mall for spiritual consumers, or the church as a filling station, or the church that exists to meet my needs), I find the model Jesus offers here far more compelling. That’s the model of the church as a circle of sacrificial love, full of merciful, meek, righteous-hungry, peacemaking people of genuine faith, who possess a willingness to deal with great stress for the sake of the gospel. A people who are deeply blessed, in the sense of being shaped and drawn in the direction of the Kingdom of God where we are daily called to do the most difficult thing: love as we have been loved, forgive as we have been forgiven, and serve as we have been served...and where, in so doing, we understand the depth of the blessing we have received at God’s hand.

So, here’s the question: if that’s the way it is, if the Beatitudes indeed offer a glimpse into true, Christ-shaped reality, then how will these words affect us? How will they shape our living and our ministry?

There is one person I know of who probably embodied these beatitudes better than most. One of those who probably would be in the “not religious but deeply spiritual” categories, although I first heard him live in a church. His name was Pete Seeger, and he died this week at the age of 93. He was a folk singer who had a fire in his belly for justice, and for those on the edges back in the 30s and 40s and beyond. And the remarkable thing about Pete is through all those years of
playing a single banjo and singing with a single unyielding human voice, of being blacklisted during the McCarthy era as a Communist sympathizer, he had a simple message: Make the world a better place, and be kind while doing it.

“If I had a hammer,”

he’d sing...

“I’d hammer in the morning,
I’d hammer in the evening, all over this land.

“If I had a bell, I’d ring it in the morning,
I’d ring it in the evening, all over this land.

“If I had a song, I’d sing it in the morning,
I’d sing it in the evening, all over this land.”

And then he put it all together:

“Well, I’ve got a hammer, and I’ve got a bell,
and I’ve got a song to sing, all over the land.
It’s the hammer of justice,
It’s the bell of freedom,
It’s the song about love between my brothers
and my sisters, all over this land.”

He was passionately joyful about what could be; the kind of country that we could make if we were full of mercy, meek, peacemaking people, not settling for less; indeed, I think he sang about the kind of church that Jesus would want us to be.

For if the beatitudes pronounce God’s view of reality over against what the world claims as real, and if we are people of God, then what’s stopping us from chucking the way the world has settled for less and beginning to expect and to shape blessing in the midst of the here and now.

“I am blessed,” that woman said to me that day, in the face of all that life had thrown at her, “I am blessed.”

I wonder if those words might form on our lips one day ... even today.

If they do, then we shall be comforted, we shall inherit the earth, we shall be called children of God, and, in the words of Pete Seeger again, words that galvanized a nation: We shall overcome!

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3 This previous section, and the theme of this sermon, is indebted to Robert Dunham of the University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina in his sermon “That’s the Way it is.”