

Okay, so I was doing a little research. The Beatitudes come right at the beginning of the Sermon On the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, – and I wanted to do a quick study on the topography the place where some think it happened.

After Jesus left Nazareth, he took up residence in Capernaum, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The region of the Galilee was unusual for several reasons:

1. The lake itself is below sea level – lower than any other freshwater lake in the world. In our own time, I read that the water levels are sinking, so that very soon there may not be enough water to feed the River Jordan, which flows from the south end.
2. The Galilee region was only a little smaller than Rhode Island – only with twice the population. Yet there were hundreds of towns with populations bigger than 15,000 people. Maybe 2-4 million people lived in the area when Jesus was there – a lot more than I would have imagined. It's not like Jesus and his crew were the only people moving around. There were so many people that it would be easier to believe that only a few could recognize him – those who may have been in the crowd when he spun out his parables or healed people. It was a busy part of the middle east, and I think Jesus and the disciples might have been relatively anonymous much of the time.

3. The soil and climate permitted the growth of many kinds of crops. Put the seed in the ground (assuming you're putting it in the good soil, and not on the rocky path or in the briar bushes) and you have a good crop. So, there was wheat and barley, lentils and peas.
4. Some people had flocks of sheep and goats, and were sometimes allowed to keep them in the land around a village. They often slept with their flocks to protect against robbers or wild animals.
5. There were different kinds of servanthood – or slavery. People might have sold themselves into slavery to pay off a debt – or even to guarantee food and shelter for themselves.
6. Those who worked on special crafts were builders, stonemasons (stonecutters), carpenters, woodcarvers, boatbuilders, goldsmiths, silversmiths, glass workers, potters, leather workers, and weavers.

So I got the picture of a robust community with lots of people moving around. I had always pictured a quiet countryside with a few small villages. But it sounds to me that Galilee was a bustling area – without any of the 21st century technology.

In that setting long ago, Jesus and his companions traveled from village to village, often returning to the home of one of them

for the night. When you think about those occasions reported on in the Gospels where a crowd gathered – even the feeding of five or ten thousand people – the healings, the miraculous signs - realize that whatever crowd gathered was still only a tiny fraction of all the people who were in the area. Most people may have had very little awareness of Jesus and his little band of followers.

So the task for Jesus was to prepare his followers to take on his mission and message. He wanted them to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was already present among them.

And that's where the Sermon on the Mount comes in – and particularly, the 8 Beatitudes which begin it.

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

These words begin the list. They're presented as blessings. They don't attempt to tell a story or to challenge thought; they are meant as blessings. So, thinking of all those millions of people inhabiting the hundreds of villages in Palestine, who do you think Jesus was trying to reach with these blessings? Soldiers? Farmers? Herders? Fishers? Carpenters?

Who do you think would embrace those words and find life in them? Until this week, I would have said they are for everybody who sees them. They are so pleasant to contemplate.

But Thursday and Friday convinced me that these blessings of Jesus were not meant for people who have had things go well for them, people who have great homes and families, people who

know who they are and have made good lives in their communities.

On Thursday I met a woman who asked for a prayer, because her life has fallen apart, and she needed a blessing. She has faith and has read the bible. She said she feels like Job – sitting in ashes while everything he valued in life has been taken away.

This woman is one of God's beloved. She gave no hint of being entitled or playing a game. She came off as a child of God who knows the valley of the shadow of death – but reaches out for hope.

When I read, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" – I KNOW that Jesus was thinking of people like her.

Galilee was filled with millions of people – but Jesus poured his heart out toward those who were lost – who felt crushed – who had no hope of finding a physician.

I don't think he intended his followers to just go around giving these blessings to anybody who was hurting – but I think Jesus knew who was listening when he said,

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

When most people heard those words, they probably thought, "Hmmm. That's a nice thing to say – I wonder what he means by that?" But to the mourner who heard those words, Jesus ignited hope and healing in their hearts. That's when they were truly ready to listen to some "Good News."

When people are rising up, when they're building up their confidence, when they are practicing their skills and making new friends, they're not so likely to hear Jesus when he says,

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

By the way, that word "Meek" isn't exactly what it sounds like to the American ear. The French translate that as "Debonnair."

Nobody who has just scored a touchdown or got a new job is going to relate to "Meek." But I think Jesus was teaching his disciples to look carefully into people's souls for that presence that isn't trying to boast or put on any pretense of being anything other than one of the beloved offspring of the Creator.

On Friday Bobbie and I sat in the audience while the First Generation / Performance Project presented "Stand Tall, Mi Gente." The audience included residents of a recovery place in Holyoke – and some of their teachers. During the performance, so many of them held back tears. In the discussion afterward, they shared bits and pieces of their lives, including some who knew addiction, bullying or body shaming, some who knew separation from children, and some who have escaped abuse. Most of them could speak about grandmothers who held their family together during the tough times – gave each one dignity.

I hope I am representing them fairly to say that they have known grief and pain and loss unlike many of us could imagine. They are exactly the ones who will be able to Jesus:

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

But the rest of us have known sadness. We have been at the brink of losing hope. We have tried one last time to put a brave face on our inner turmoil – and wondered how we find life again. When we experience those things, THEN we are ready to hear those beatitudes:

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

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

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

When things are going great and everything is humming along, those are just nice-sounding words. They are audio objects that remind us of our faith tradition.

With all those millions of people living in Galilee when Jesus was doing his ministry, most of them would probably just shrug and keep on with what they were already doing.

But on those days when one of them was feeling crushed or stressed out, or worthless, I think Jesus would go to that person, reach out with a blessing, and open their heart with one of these blessings.

May the blessings we receive bring us to new life – and may the new life we experience bring us to Do Justice, Love Kindness, and to Walk Humbly with God.