



The Easy Yoke
March 22, 2007
Lenten Vespers 5

Matthew 5:8-9
“Yoked to a Vision”
M. Craig Barnes

This evening I am continuing in a series of teaching sermons entitled, “The Easy Yoke.” This refers to the yoke of Jesus, which he invited his disciples to take upon themselves. The yoke, he said, is easy. But it’s not easy because it’s burden-free. It’s easy because it gives us the right burdens to bear, the burdens of Christ. Beneath the yoke of Christ, we find his character forming in our lives. We’re looking at the character of Christ through the lens of the Beatitudes.

Today we come to verse 8 and verse 9. First, verse 8, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” To be pure means to be un-mixed, unadulterated. Gold can be pure, but so can heroin. So, purity doesn’t necessarily equate with righteousness. Remember, from one of the earlier Beatitudes we learned that we are only made righteous by confessing our spiritual poverty. Purity in this context means singular in purpose.

Søren Kierkegaard said, “Purity of heart means to will one thing.” Blessed are those who will one thing. Now this is challenging to us. To will one thing excludes other options. It is a rather frightening level of commitment to devote your life to one thing. We have learned by now the wisdom of having fall-back plans. This Beatitude makes no room for that. Blessed are those who have no alternative saviors up their sleeves—like their nest egg or their health or their beauty or their ability to work hard.

Most of us would say that we’re happy to let Jesus be the savior. He can even go first and, if he pulls off salvation, great. But just in case, we’ve got plan B. But if we mean it when we call Jesus savior, then nothing else and no one else can be savior, including us. Jesus alone is necessary for salvation.

Blessed then are those who believe that they are not necessary. It is an extraordinary blessing to discover that you are not necessary. The reason it’s a blessing is that it allows you to be loved. You have no choice about things that are necessary. You have to have them. They are needed and necessary. Love is always and only a choice. It wasn’t necessary for God to love us. The blessing is that God chose to do that. There are so many of us who are knocking ourselves out at home or in the workplace to make ourselves necessary, and what we really long for is to be cherished. We don’t make room for people to do that, because we try so hard to be necessary.

The blessing of realizing you are not necessary is that then you get to see God. And the reason you can see God when you are willing the salvation of Christ is that you are no longer in the way, which is what our illusions of necessity do to us. They get us in the way of the light of Christ. We can’t *see* Christ because we’re too busy pretending to *be* Christ. Blessed are those who are out of the way, so they can see the salvation that Christ alone can bring.

One other thing about the blessing of willing one thing in life—when your heart is divided, this division pervades everything. On the one hand, you believe that you are the beloved, but with the other side of your divided heart, you still harbor doubts about your self-worth. You believe, but have unbelief. You tell your friends or your family, “I love you just the way you are.” But from the other side of the divided heart little suggestions for improvement keep springing forth. On one side of the heart you believe that each day is a wonderful gift from God. But out of the other side of the divided heart comes one complaint after another that wastes the gift of the day. All of this is rooted in a fundamental divided heart we have about

Jesus. If, in fact, we will the one thing that he is savior, then he is savior of everyone and everything else, which are received by us as his gifts.

Verse 9, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” I think one of the most important things to remember about this Beatitude is what it does not say. It does not say blessed are the peace-lovers. It’s asking for more than that. The Beatitude calls us to be the children of God, joint-heirs with Jesus Christ, the beloved sons and daughters of God. That means that if you are going to share Christ’s identity, then you have to share Christ’s mission. And Christ’s mission wasn’t just to love peace, but to *make* peace. Blessed are the *peacemakers*.

We cannot do that without taking risks. And the biggest risk you have to take if you are devoted to being a peacemaker is that you may have to give up being right. It is always the clash of right positions that leads to conflict. I’m right. You’re right. We’re in conflict. Neither of us will sacrifice our positions, which means no one is interested in the pursuit of truth. We’re interested in the defending of positions at that point.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I watched a wonderful movie titled *Joyeux Noël*. It depicts the true story of a particular Christmas Eve on the battlefronts of World War I. The French troops were dug into their trench. Beside them was another trench in which Scottish troops had dug in. They were both fighting the German troops in an opposing trench not very far away.

During a moment of ceasefire, a German soldier began singing a Christmas carol. Even though the French and Scottish soldiers did not know the German language, they recognized the tune. When he was done, singing began to break out in one of the other trenches and then in the third trench. Before long, they were all singing.

Then after they were done singing, someone took the risk of putting his Christmas tree up out of the trench onto the ground, so that everyone could see it. Then one of the soldiers took a *huge* risk of standing up to wish his enemy a merry Christmas. Then the other soldiers began to stand up. And on that Christmas Eve eventually all these soldiers left their trenches to celebrate the birth of their one common savior. It didn’t last long. But it was long enough to give a little hope for peace on earth.

There is still a tremendous amount of trench warfare that goes on in our own lives, trenches that divide *us* from *them*. Sometimes we’ll even stick our head out of the trench, but usually it’s only long enough to shoot at somebody in another trench. Your workplace where you spent the day today probably has people divided into different trenches. Maybe at times even your friendships divide into trenches where you talk about us versus them. Maybe even your family. Clearly, our world has trenches.

The religious world has always had opposing trenches. According to Luke, when Jesus was in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he read the wonderful text from Isaiah about messianic prophecy. And Jesus said, “Today, this prophecy has been fulfilled.” He was claiming that he was the messiah. Initially, all the Jews in the synagogue spoke so well of him, saying, “Was this not Joseph’s boy? We knew this guy was going to amount to something.” But then, Jesus continued his sermon by reminding the congregation of God’s great love for the Gentiles. God loves not only us, but also them. Then the congregation dragged Jesus to a cliff and tried to throw him off. “How can God possibly care about them?” the religious objected. To this day, we still try to figure out who are the Gentiles, those *them*, those people out there. But in Christ, God is dying to love them.

To be the children of God means our mission sooner or later is to climb out of our trench, to treat the person you are most worried about as brother or sister in Christ. Now, I’m not saying that you should sacrifice your convictions about what’s right and what’s wrong. Of course not. But as I said in the sermon

last Sunday, at least one of our convictions has to be compassion. And face to face, it is easier to resolve conflicts over convictions and to *make* peace.

Let me leave you with one caution. Serious peacemaking takes time. Since neither the conviction nor the compassion can be sacrificed, that means we have to live with ambiguity for a long, long time. If Jesus did not get this issue between the Jews and the Gentiles resolved in Nazareth, don't expect that you are going to get this worked out quickly between us and them. All of the great debates in the church's history took centuries to work out. But in time, a means of discerning the way forward always did emerge. That time didn't come until generations had come and gone. Our personal mission is not to resolve the great conflicts, but to not allow the conflicts to break apart the relationships God has established.

So whether it is in your family, in the larger church, the city or the world around us, let us remember that peacemaking is messy business. And to be the child of God means that you are called to stay in the mess and to will one thing. That one thing we are called to will is not to triumph, not to ensure that others agree that we are right. The one thing that we are called for is to look for the truth and the salvation that Jesus alone can bring.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Benediction: When you know how to will one thing, then you know what to do about all of the other things. Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the communion of the Holy Spirit go with you all. Amen.