

“Super Sunday: Blessings and Paradox”

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

Central Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Today is Super Bowl Sunday. My children’s sermon two weeks ago must have jinxed them, so there are no Packers to watch today. But, I, along with an estimated ninety million Americans, will be watching the game.<sup>1</sup> It is a cultural event and should be fun. Now pretend you are an alien anthropologist, assigned to study our culture. You just arrived on your UFO and landed in America today and have just twelve hours to really understand our culture. At the end of today, you have to get back in your spaceship and file your report. If you cannot imagine yourself as an alien anthropologist getting into a UFO and having to file planetary reports, then just think for a few moments as if you are a simple sociologist trying to understand our culture.

Either way, as you file your report about cultural values today, you might summarize our culture with these words:

- Blessed are the winners – there is nothing more important. And the corollary, coming in second is the same as losing. (This would be especially clear if you sit with Viking fans reminiscing about their four Super Bowl appearances - and four Super Bowl losses).
- Blessed are those who are happy, and if you are not, then buy something that was advertised. Speaking of those advertisements,
- Blessed are those who are young and beautiful.
- Blessed are those who are rich.
- Blessed are those who can afford fancy cars and big trucks.
- Blessed are those who eat themselves silly on nachos and pizza, there is always more food.

We welcome visitors every Sunday, and I sure hope that alien anthropologist comes here for worship at Central first. For the message of the church is different today. I am proud of our youth for again participating in the Souper Bowl of Caring. A simple prayer: "Lord, even as we enjoy the Super Bowl football game, help us be mindful of those who are without a bowl of soup to eat" inspired a youth-led movement to help hungry and hurting people around the world. This prayer, delivered by Brad Smith, then a seminary intern serving at Spring Valley Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC, gave birth to an idea. Why not use Super Bowl weekend, a time when people come together for football and fun, to also unify the nation for a higher good: collecting dollars and canned food for the needy?<sup>2</sup>

Today we remember the words Jesus spoke to his disciples and a crowd gathered to hear him. He went up on a mountain, and began what we now know as his Sermon on the Mount, with these words.

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

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
 Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
 Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Biblical scholar Warren Carter understands the gospel of Matthew as Jesus' description of the empire of God written for people living in a time of the Roman Empire. These two empires, God's empire and Caesar's empire have different values and rules and final authorities. Carter writes,

For those who belong to the minority and marginal community of disciples of Jesus, the sermon [on the Mount] continues the gospel's formational and envisioning work. It shapes and strengthens the community's identity and lifestyle as a small community in a dominant culture that does not share that culture's fundamental convictions. The community is reminded that interactions with God, with one another, and with the surrounding society are important aspects of their existence which embraces all of life, present and future.<sup>3</sup>

Another way of saying that is that the ways of Jesus are not the ways of the world. In a world of empire in which the strong and powerful rule and the vulnerable are oppressed, it was revolutionary for those who heard Jesus say on the mountain, "blessed are the poor . . . the meek . . . the persecuted."

Theologians and Christian ethicists have long asked whether these Beatitudes, these blessings, and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount were meant to be put into practice in more than an individual kind of way. Just how practical are they? ethicists wonder. What would it look like if a whole community or a nation put into practice Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount? Teachings that include, in addition to "blessed are the peacemakers" also: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer" (Matt 5:38-39) and "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:43-44). Despite all the remaining presidential candidates sharing their faith, I don't hear any of them quoting these teachings of Jesus while simultaneously trying to be strong on defense.

Biblical scholar Warren Carter says,  
 The sermon is not, though, a comprehensive manual or rule book, not a step-by-step "how to" book. Rather it offers a series of illustrations . . . of life in God's empire,

visions of the identity and way of life that result from encountering God's present and future reign.<sup>4</sup>

This Wednesday, I was touched that Nelly Trocmé Hewett joined us for a viewing of a documentary about the town of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France.<sup>5</sup> Her father was the pastor whose story was the basis for our children's recent Christmas pageant. Le Chambon has become famous because this small rural village was part of a larger community credited with rescuing thousands of refugees during the Nazi years. It was great to have Nelly tell us stories from when she was a teenager in Le Chambon, as well as her connections today to Holocaust survivors and rescuers. Nelly was showing some of the books that have been written about Le Chambon, including one with the odd-sounding title, We Only Know Men.<sup>6</sup> Someone asked Nelly what the title meant, and she said it was from a quote of her father (who now would have said we only know humans). A local official, who was collaborating with the Nazis threatened Pastor André Trocmé that they were coming to find the Jews being hidden in Le Chambon. "We know you are hiding Jews," he said. And Pastor Trocmé responded, "We do not know what a Jew is. We only know men."

Living faithfully in a world of empire and terror, we are reminded that goodness can emerge from the most basic of Christian impulses. Feeding the hungry. Welcoming the stranger.<sup>7</sup> Remembering Jesus' words that blessed are the poor, the meek, those who are persecuted. As the people of Le Chambon insisted, they were not heroes - they just acted out their beliefs.

Sometimes it comes down to just such basic concerns. And it will not always be easy, for we do not live in an easy world to live out the beatitudes. Blessed are the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and the pure in heart and the peacemakers. None of those qualities come easily. And too often we can become self-righteous or delude ourselves into thinking we are being faithful. I saw a cartoon of a man standing at the pearly gates of heaven being greeted by an angel behind the desk looking at computer screen. "You say 'meek,'" the angel says, "but your records say 'passive-aggressive.'"<sup>8</sup>

On this day, as we watch and probably lean too much toward glorifying athletes in the Super Bowl, it is important to remember that our Christian values are different from the values of the world. Sports while fun and healthy and important, can distort values. I think of the baseball slugger Mark McGwire – in the midst of his home run record breaking season (aided, we now know, with steroid-fueled muscles) who thanked the "big man upstairs." In the paper this morning we read of record contracts for Johan Santana getting one hundred and thirty-seven million and a half dollars to play a game for six years for a new team. And watching the Super Bowl may remind Minnesotans of superstar receiver Randy Moss, who once pushed a traffic control agent with his car to get her out of his way.

We need to be here at church today and remember that we hold deeper values. Values that seem foolish, as Paul put it in a letter to the Corinthian church, foolish and weak to the world.

It is not easy to live out Christian values in our world that values the famous and the strong instead of the meek and the humble. It is not easy to be a faithful follower of Jesus. But it can be done. And it takes a community to support one another, to hold each other accountable, to help us live out our ideals.

At our recent Inquirers' Class, one visitor said that what attracted her to Central was that we are an underdog church. I loved that line, and have been reflecting on it ever since she said it. We are an underdog church – not powerful or wealthy or a status-oriented community. Just a small church with a big building trying to be in the city for good. To be peacemakers in our homes and schools and community. To comfort those who mourn. To nurture a hunger for righteousness. To offer and receive mercy. Underdog values.

Blessed are the meek.  
 Blessed are the merciful.  
 Blessed are the pure in heart.  
 Blessed are the peacemakers.  
 Blest are they. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 93.2 million Americans were estimated to have watched the 2007 game, according to CBS news, [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/05/superbowl/main2437074.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/05/superbowl/main2437074.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Souper Bowl of Caring, see [www.souperbowl.org](http://www.souperbowl.org).

<sup>3</sup> Warren Carter, Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003 edition) 129.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>5</sup> "Weapons of the Spirit: The Astonishing Story of a Unique Conspiracy of Goodness," by Pierre Sauvage (1989) available through [www.chambon.org](http://www.chambon.org).

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Henry, We Only Know Men: The Rescue of Jews in France During the Holocaust (Catholic University of America Press, 2007)

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 25.

<sup>8</sup> The New Yorker Collection, 2007 Mike Twohy from [cartoonbank.com](http://cartoonbank.com), published in Christian Century 29 January, 2008, 8.