



From the Pulpit: February 18, 2024

First Sunday in Lent—Presidents' Day Weekend

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Matthew 5:1–4

God's Odd Benedictions, II: The Sad

During Lent at Kenilworth Union Katie, Chris-tine, and I are preaching a sermon series called God's Odd Benedictions about Jesus' Beatitudes.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

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

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

"How would you like to be treated by a dentist who has never known pain?"

mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Many of us have been there. This is the Church of the Beatitudes. It is octagonal in shape to represent the eight Beatitudes. Our third graders count nine; the definitive number depends on how you mash up a couple of them.

"Happy are the sad," says Jesus. Why would he say that? It's literally an oxymoron, a contradiction. At first it appears to be one of God's classically odd benedictions.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that it seems as if Jesus looks at the world while standing on his

Jesus launches the most famous sermon in history with eight pithy bullet points which are so paradoxical and unexpected they were obviously constructed to catch the congregation's attention. They are *God's Odd Benedictions*.

Since Latin became its official language, the Christian Church has called these eight bullet points The Beatitudes, because each one begins with the Latin word *beati*, which means "Happy" or "Blessed."

Since the fourth century, the Church has taken this site to be the place where Jesus delivered the *Sermon on the Mount*. It's located on a modest

head; everything is upside down.¹

But you don't have to think too long to see why Jesus puts it this way. You have to be hurt before you can be healed. You have to be broken before you can be fixed. You have to have failed before you know how to succeed. You have to have known harrowing loss yourself before you can console the weeping widow who's just lost her husband of 20 years.

¹Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon "Blessed Are the Upside Down," in *Gospel Medicine* (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), pp. 145–146.

How would you like to be treated by a dentist who has never known pain? How would you like to go to a doctor who has never had Covid? How would you like to take your car to an auto mechanic whose own car has never broken down? How would you like to talk to a marriage therapist who never fights bitterly with her own husband? How would you like to take your money to a financial advisor whose stocks and bonds never go down? They call that guy Bernie Madoff.

Said one Jewish scholar, “It is frustration and sorrow that are our passports to fellowship and sympathy. Life teaches us at every turn how insufferable are those who have never suffered.”² Yes? Have you experienced the insufferability of the unsuffering: the frozen face, the unmoved affect, the narcotic numbness of the unsuffering?

When Katie Lancaster and Melanie Flynn train our Stephen Ministers, they know that one of the greatest obstacles they have to overcome is a stubborn lack of self-confidence. “I can’t do this,” they think. “I didn’t go to seminary. I don’t have the skills.”

But I told the Stephen Ministers once,
if you have raised a child,
if you have suffered a painful loss in your
own life,

if you have had your heart broken by another
or by life or by God,

if you have struggled with and defeated addiction,

if you have wrestled with depression,

if you have ever been hospitalized, you have almost as much of what you need to help another hurting parishioner as a professional therapist or an ordained pastor.

“Said one Jewish scholar, ‘It is frustration and sorrow that are our passports to fellowship and sympathy.’”

Do you read the *Modern Love* Column in *The New York Times*, or listen to the podcast? In 2017, to mark its 13th anniversary, *Modern Love* asked its readers to submit 13-word love stories.

Most *Modern Love* columns are 1,500 words long, but they wanted 13-word love stories. Here’s one. “I’m broken,” she said. “That’s how they make stained glass” he said. Isn’t that beautiful? Shades of Leonard Cohen: “There is a crack, a crack, in everything; that’s how the light gets in.”³ “I’m broken” she said. “That’s how they make stained glass” he said. You’re no use to anyone

unless you’ve been broken.

The Jews are among the most excluded and oppressed and beleaguered ethnicities in the history of the west. The terror and the trauma have been going on for centuries, including and especially the Nazi’s towering malice.

I am heartbroken that despite this awful experience, they have turned their wreckful rage on another scorned minority. Twenty-seven thousand Palestinians have been killed in Gaza; 40% of the fatalities are children.

²Slightly adapted from Robert Gordis, *Book of God and Man* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 114.

³Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem,” from *The Future*.

I'll do the math for you: that's 11,000 dead children. Seventeen thousand children have been orphaned or separated from their families, which has led to an appalling new acronym in Gaza: W.C.N.S.F.—Wounded Child, No Surviving Family. Think about that for a second. Wounded Child, No Surviving Family. Some families in Gaza send their children away in opposite directions; that way if a bomb explodes near the family, they won't all be dead.⁴

I am surprised that the Jews' ancient, sad lament has not taught them a longer memory and a larger mercy.

Well that was sad. Let me end with a happier tune. Do you know who John T. Chambers is? He was CEO of Cisco Systems from 1995 to 2015. Cisco is an information technology company in San Jose, CA, with 85,000 employees. Last year *Fortune* Magazine said Cisco was the best company to work for in the United States.

When John Chambers took over in 1995, the company had revenue of \$1.9 billion; when he retired in 2015, it was \$49.2 billion, but did you know there was a time when people thought he wasn't smart enough to attend college? No one thought he'd ever get in.

He says "Before people knew about learning disabilities, my teachers thought I wasn't very smart. I read backward and in reverse order. I had to go to extra school, which I hated. My family refused to accept the idea that I couldn't go to college. I considered dyslexia a weakness and never talked about it.

⁴At least 17,000 Children in Gaza Are Unaccompanied or Separated from Their Families, UNICEF Says," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2024.

But he figured it out. He earned a J.D. degree from West Virginia University and an MBA from Indiana.

Mr. Chambers said, "A while back we had 'Bring Your Kid to Work' Day at Cisco. The kids asked everything from 'How much money do you have?' to 'Are you doing a good job leading the company?'"

"You're no use to anyone unless you've been broken."

"One little girl tried to ask a question and couldn't get it out. She started to cry. She said 'I have a learning disability.' I said: 'So do I. Take your time.' I was a little bit embarrassed. Maybe I shouldn't have shared that personal detail. But that evening, there were

a dozen e-mail messages. One said 'You don't know what it meant for my child.'"⁵ Frustration can be a passport to sympathy.

Life can be hard. Bad things happen to us. You break an arm. The biopsy comes back positive. Someone you thought you would spend the rest of your life with says "I've fallen out of love." You lose a job, or a long love.

But all that sadness makes us who we are, and turns us into splendid, useful instruments in the hands of our merciful God, and makes us precious to one another.

Because "frustration and sorrow are our passports to fellowship and sympathy."

⁵John T. Chambers, "The Boss: Speaking Up About Dyslexia," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2001.

—The Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

God of the clear winter sky and February snows,
God of the migrating birds,
God of the meek and mourning,
God of mystery that tempers our knowledge,

We seek your nearness this Lenten season,
In the brisk cadence of a walk by the lake,
In the steady hum of hospital rooms,
In this sanctuary where we pause from the
drumbeat of our daily lives to pay attention to
your rhythms.

And so we thank you God, for your presence in
our lives and the
relationships we nurture in this church
community.
We thank you for food and shelter,
Our families and friends,
For that which has been mended,
For the possibility of healing,
For purposeful work to do,
And for the countless simple gifts we often take
for granted.

We trust that you are with us even in the
challenging and grief-stricken times in our lives.

For many awaiting and recovering from surgery
we give you thanks for good medical care and ask
for an extra measure of healing and strength.

For those who have carried their grief for a long
time, Lord be comfort.

Wrap all whose grief is fresh and aching into your
care.

For those who are discerning next steps for the
coming school year,
Bring clarity and assurance.

For those whose anxieties rise, guide the way
toward quiet refuge.
When even joyful celebrations result in violence,
Have mercy O Lord.

For so many around the world who face the
unfathomable hardships of war, Poverty, and
lack of opportunity, make a way.

Kindle in us all a desire to find, if not solutions, at
least some relief to intractable problems.

Help us to be expressions of your love in this
world,
Offering shelter for the houseless,
Warm coats and gloves for those arriving at train
stations,
Toothbrushes and soap for those who have none.

For it is you O God, who desires the well-being
of all. Through Jesus Christ we know the upside-
down blessings of peace, justice, and your
kingdom come: Our Father.... Amen.

**You may use these prayers for non-commercial purposes in any medium, provided you include a brief credit line with the author's name (if applicable) and a link to the original post.*