



From the Pulpit: February 25, 2024

Second Sunday in Lent

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Matthew 5:1–5

God’s Odd Benedictions, III: The Meek

During Lent at Kenilworth Union, we are preaching a sermon series called “God’s Odd Benedictions” on Jesus’ Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount.

Eugene Peterson translates this beatitude like this: “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.”¹

Everything that can’t be bought.

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.

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

*“You’re
blessed when
you’re content
with just who
you are”*

Is Jesus right about that? Not always. To get at the meek, I want to begin with one of the least meek celebrities I can think of just now. Did anybody see the basketball game between the Iowa Hawkeyes and the Michigan Wolverines last week?

Iowa’s star Caitlin Clark came into the game needing eight points to break the all-time scoring record for NCAA Women. Did she do it? Well, I guess so! She scored Iowa’s first eight points and broke the scoring record two minutes and 15 seconds into the first quarter.

She ended up with 49 points in that game—a personal record—which left her 98 points shy of the all-time NCAA record for both men and women. After the Michigan game, she had 3,569 all-time points, which was 98 points short of Pete Maravich’s all-time NCAA scoring record, 3,667. You remember how they called Pete Maravich Pistol Pete? They call Caitlin Clark Ponytail Pete.

“Blessed are the meek,” says Jesus. “Blessed are the gentle.” “Blessed are the humble.”

When you study Jesus’ Beatitudes, you have to pay attention first to the eccentricity of the folk who receive a blessing—the poor, the sad, the meek, for example. And then you have to attend to the particular blessing each kind of blessed person uniquely receives.

The poor says Jesus, will receive the kingdom. The sad will be consoled. And the meek—what do they get? They get **everything**. The meek will inherit the earth.

¹Eugene Peterson in his Bible translation *The Message*.

When she was a kid she played basketball in the boys' league. One year she was named MVP. The parents were furious. "You can't give the MVP award in the boys' league to a girl!" they said. They had a point.

Caitlin Clark is not meek. She is not a shrinking violet. She's always talking trash to opponents and abusing the refs and making these sweeping, arrogant gestures on the court.

None of this is a criticism. I love Caitlin. She means so much to women's basketball. For instance, I was so touched by this photo—three little girls with #22 jerseys, mesmerized by their hero, with hair ribbons that make them look just like Ponytail Pete.

Maybe Jesus should have said "Blessed are the strong, for they shall inherit the earth." That's the reality, right? Jesus is living in some fantasy land that will never exist.

The world is full of arrogant blustery old men who think they are so smart they can make all decisions for hundreds of millions of people. There are megalomaniacs in Israel, in Iran, in China, in Russia, and in Hungary who will throw you in jail if you disagree with them. If you uncover your hair in Iran, they will kill you. Totalitarianism is on the rise globally just now.

There was a discouraging article in *The Washington Post* the other day. Do you know that in America, commitment to democracy is declining? The younger you are, the less committed you are to democracy.

Seventy percent of Americans born before World War II say that democracy is essential for the

individual to flourish. For Americans under 40, it's 30%.²

This just feels so sad and so ominous to me. Democracy is government of, by, and for the meek. In a democracy, citizens agree that **none** of us is smart enough to make decisions for **all** of us. In a democracy, we make our decisions together, or not at all.

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"Blessed are the meek," says Jesus. Have I told you this story before? I don't think I have. Do you know the names Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone? They were probably the two most prominent members of the British Parliament during the nineteenth century while Victoria was queen.

Mr. Gladstone was a member of the Liberal Party and Mr. Disraeli was a Conservative, and essentially they took turns be-

ing Prime Minister, depending on which party was in the ascendancy at the time. They were both extremely impressive orators and intellects.

Queen Victoria's granddaughter tells a story. When she was a young woman, she went to dinner one night with Mr. Gladstone and the next night with Mr. Disraeli, and when someone asked her what impressions the two giants left, she said, "After the evening with Mr. Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest man in England, but after spending the evening with Mr. Disraeli I thought I was the cleverest woman in England."³

²Danielle Allen, "Will You Join the Supermajority for Constitutional Democracy?", *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2024.

³*Little-Brown Book of Anecdotes*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (Boston: Little-Brown, 1982), p. 171.

Now, which of those two guys would you rather spend an evening with?

In 2013 Peter W. Higgs of the University of Edinburgh—go Scots!—won the Nobel Prize in physics for his work with what is known as the Higgs boson, named for guess who?

He suggested his theory about the Higgs boson in 1964, and the Large Hadron Atom Smasher in Switzerland confirmed the theory in 2012.

“I have no idea what a Higgs boson is,” you say? Well neither do I, but I’m going to take a swing at it. Apparently the universe is full of this particular kind of energy called the Higgs boson. It acts like a kind of cosmic molasses slowing down elementary particles like electrons. The Higgs gives mass to energy. Without the Higgs, electrons would be massless and zip around the universe pointlessly at the speed of light. Without the Higgs slowing them down, there would be no mass, no substantially, no density, no atoms, no stars, no planets, no Presbyterians, and no golden retrievers. It is a very important component of our world. It’s so important they call it “The God Particle.” Peter Higgs found it.

This gives me a chance to tell one of my favorite jokes of all time. A Higgs boson walks into a Roman Catholic church. The priest asks him, “What are you doing here?” The Higgs boson says, “You can’t have mass without me.”

Anyway Peter W. Higgs won the Nobel for physics in 2013 for this eventually confirmed theory, and nobody could find him. He’d heard he might win the Nobel, so he just left town. He just disappeared. They couldn’t find him. He didn’t want to

talk to the people in Stockholm. He doesn’t use a cellphone or a computer; he makes all these stunning discoveries in physics just with his head; well, also the Large Hadron Collider.⁴ I wish I knew this guy. “Blessed are those who are content with who they are—no more, no less.”

One more thing and then I’ll quit. I recently re-watched *Band of Brothers*. *Band of Brothers* is the splendid book written by Stephen Ambrose which Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks turned into an HBO mini-series just after they worked together on *Saving Private Ryan*. Both the book and the television series are at the apex of their respective genres.

“In a democracy, citizens agree that none of us is smart enough to make decisions for all of us.”

The central protagonist in *Band of Brothers* is Major Dick Winters, from Lancaster County, PA., the leader of Easy Company, 506th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. Damien Lewis played Dick Winters in the televi-

sion series.

Major Winters, then Captain Winters, parachuted into France on D-Day, June 6, 1944 and then fought his way across France, Belgium, and Germany until the Nazi’s surrendered on May 7, 1945. That’s almost a year under withering fire.

Major Winters’ leadership—Captain at the time—Major Winters’ leadership of Easy Company was so brave and so shrewd and so crucial to the war effort in Europe that the Army awarded him the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation’s second highest decoration after the Medal of Honor.

⁴Dennis Overbye, “For Nobel, They Can Thank the God Particle,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2013.

Dick Winters' grandson once asked him, "Grandpa, were you a hero in the war? And Dick Winters answered, "No son, but I served in a company of heroes."

"Blessed are those who are content with just who they are—no more, no less. That's the moment you realize you own everything that can't be bought."

—The Prayers of the People— The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

O Good Shepherd and guide,
O Brother Jesus, friend to all,
O Adonai, El Shaddai, Yahweh,
You are everlasting, beginning and end, first and last,
alpha and omega.

Here amid the snow, the cold, the warmth, the sun, the sudden changes in weather turning us inward and outward, longing for connection and long walks on earthen path, longing for cozy fireplace days snowed in, back and forth, leaning into the joy and mystery of each day unfolding.

Let us mark the way with joy, God. Let us find joy rushing in, small miracles, possibilities, unearthed, small burdens melted away, small gestures of love held and treasured. Give us the gift of this day, O God. Give us the gift of this day.

To you we surrender, you who ushers in peace so that I might lay down, you who sets me down safely after untold days of worry, you who is restless until we rest in you.

To you we surrender. To you we hand over all that we carry, every uneasiness, every bother, every tension and stress and strain, every wobble and need, we hand over to you.

We give ourselves over to your subtle, complex, elusive spirit, knowing that you are here, with us, in our midst, and yet trusting that in finding you, your

mystery is still yet never diminished, you are always deeper than deep, wider than wide.

We pray for our own trouble, hardship, embarrassment, pain, and struggle. Let us lean on those who have gone before us, let us lean on our web of ancestors, let us lean, trusting that there is and must be a way through. Let us carry on. Let there be a way forward with your strength at our side, the possibility of blessing just there on the road ahead, while you forge a path onward. Your spirit, protective and warm, encircling, circled, enclosing all.

We pray for justice, God. For your kingdom come. For your people to walk your way. For the burdens of carelessness and the horrors of violence to decrease. For wars to cease. For orphans to find a home. For the wounded to find care. For governments to weave a web of peace. For leaders to lit up their voices toward your vision of love. We give ourselves over to your love that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

We give our eternal "yes" to your spirit within the ordinariness of our day.

A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere, so let your spirit rise up to meet us while we are here, nestled in worship, here, rooted, here, open. Rise up, O God.

And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us: Our Father.... Amen.

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