

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Ecumenical Sunday
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
January 29, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper**

**“A Vision Beautiful”
Christian Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12**



Credit: Winnipeg Centre Vineyard

One of the reasons why I felt called to Brattleboro, Vermont was because I believed I could ‘preach’ *and* ‘teach’. I have always felt that, vocationally speaking, I am a better academic and teacher than I am a minister. But, I love the church, more than anything in the world. And I love all of you. And I love being a minister. So, it always made sense to me to do what I am good at *and* do what I love. So, this past week I began teaching a class, once a week, at the Community College of Vermont.

One of the primary benefits of teaching and preaching is that I am constantly able to cross-pollinate that which I teach and preach. Actually, this should not be unique to me. All of you, no matter what you do, whether you are a banker or a volunteer, whether you are a nurse or a child care provider, whether you are lawyer or an artist, you should always cross-pollinate your work or your passion with your faith. Each should be constantly informing the other so that our faith is dynamic, growing, deepening, and enriching.

The class I am teaching at the community college is Intercultural Communication. Chapter one of the first text we are reading provides a definition of 'culture': Culture is the "on-going negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors".¹ Listen to that! A supposed secular sociological term that speaks to 'beliefs', 'values', and 'behaviors'. With common-denominators like those, how can I not relate what I teach with what I will preach?!

'The Beatitudes' is one of the most quintessential scriptural markers of Christianity. "The Beatitudes are sayings attributed to Jesus, and in particular eight blessings recounted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, and four in the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke, followed by

¹ Ahrndt, Shannon, *Intercultural Communication*, University of Missouri, St. Louis, (2020). Open Educational Resources Collection, 24. Available at: <https://irl.umsl.edu/oer/24>, accessed January 28, 2023.

four woes [that] mirror the blessings. Each is a proverb-like proclamation, without narrative”, that is, without a story, like a parable.²

[Many people wonder from where does the word ‘beatitude’ come? The Latin adjective ‘*beātī*’ which means ‘blessed’ was made popular in noun form by Cicero and this noun form was included as a heading in the Latin Vulgate Bible. In 1540, the word was anglicized for English speakers until we have the variation of that as ‘beatitudes’.]

Remember I mentioned earlier that one of the key aspects of culture is attitude? Well, we only have to put one and one together to realize that the Beatitudes essentially constitute a ‘culture’. The attitude of the Beatitudes conveys to us a set of ‘beliefs’, and those beliefs collectively determine our ‘values’, and our values influence our ‘behaviors’. So, all this week I have been thinking and praying about the question ‘What is the culture of the Beatitudes?’

The first beatitude, ‘blessed are the poor’ (as it is in Luke) or blessed are the poor in spirit (as it is in Matthew) has two corresponding meanings. To be poor in spirit means to be humble before God, to express your need for God, or to feel that you have nothing to offer God. Of course, blessed are the poor means what it says, that God has what in theological terms is ‘a preferential option for the poor’.

² Wikipedia, “Beatitudes”. Found at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beatitudes>, accessed January 28, 2023.

'Blessed are those who mourn' can also have three meanings. Some people 'mourn' because of their sins for which they repent or they cry because they are oppressed or they have a great capacity to love so they grieve others' deaths. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed because they constantly seek God's way. Those who are merciful show favor or forgiveness to those who perhaps do not deserve it. The pure in heart are those who harbor no selfish ambitions and whose motivations are benevolent. The peacemakers are those who reconcile people who would otherwise struggle against one another. Blessed are those who suffer complaint and criticism for doing the right thing, because it's right.

All of these proverbs together convey a culture, "a learned and patterned system of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors". Many theologians over the centuries understand The Beatitudes to communicate the central culture of Christianity as taught by Jesus Christ.

Because I teach Intercultural Communication, its very easy for me to ask, well, what is the culture of the United States, the land of my birth? Well, the United States is not a country that is humble. When I see a pick-up truck driving around with an American flag waving, I cringe. Why? Not because I don't love my country. I do love it. I cherish it, in fact. But it is arrogance, not meekness, to wave

a flag in everyone's face. Likewise, having grown-up overseas, I have always been uncomfortable with crowds from the United States chanting 'U-S-A, U-S-A' in a belligerent manner that is not so much as support for a national team as it is a proclamation that our country is more powerful and better than yours. Does that mean that there are not humble people in the USA? Absolutely not, of course there are. The people of Vermont I think are particularly humble. What I am talking about is culture, more so than people. The culture of the USA is that of bellicosity.

It is not very much in debate that the United States culture celebrates individuality. The famous Frank Sinatra Song "I Did It My Way" is emblematic. Yet, individualism can quickly devolve into selfishness and worse, a 'survival of the fittest' mentality, and thus produce a culture that believes if you are poor you do not have a right to the same quality of health care as someone who is rich.

The United States is a nation that arguably places its trust and confidence in its military power – in its capacity to kill efficiently. By far, the United States spends more money on weapons and has the greatest military capabilities in more parts of the world than any other nation. President Eisenhower once warned us of the Military Industrial Complex - a financial system that either creates or funds war so as to self-perpetuate its existence.

So, from this pulpit, I ask how does our Christian culture speak to our national culture? How do we as Christians who are citizens of the United States reconcile these two opposing cultures? Now don't get me wrong. Not everything about The Beatitudes is positive. I would never ever, ever, ever say to a battered woman, 'blessed are the meek'. The Beatitudes has a dark side, so to speak. Let us also acknowledge the positive flip-side of the United States' culture. Individualism has released humanities capacity for creativity and ingenuity and allows people to reach their fullest God-given potential. I come from a military family and I know that violent force can and does engender peace. The culture of The Beatitudes is not, in all contexts, positive. The culture of the United States is not, in all contexts, negative. Yet, I believe that even those of us who understand the nuances of both cultures must realize, accept, and grapple with the crucial question: Which culture do I primarily owe my allegiance? Do I subscribe to a Christian culture or do I subscribe to a national culture? The two are not the same. In fact, they are often opposed.

Allow me to conclude on the point of allegiance. This morning I will not provide you with an answer to the question: "To which culture should you subscribe and when?". No, I will leave that spiritual discernment to you.

I will preach what we should not do. We should not see the culture of our nation and Christian faith as the same. That is idolatry, and therefore heresy. The culture of The Beatitudes is different from the culture of nationalism, in particular, U.S. nationalism. The understanding that the two are the same is called 'Christian nationalism' and it is an increasing danger to our Christian faith *and* to our nation.

If you are more interested in this sermon or in this topic, I invite you to attend an upcoming event. On **Tuesday, January 31, at 7:00pm, the Newfane Church** will host a public conversation on Christian nationalism. Dr. Erica M. Ramirez, Director of the Center for the Study of Theological Expression at Auburn Theological Seminary, will lead this discussion. Let us support our sister church and our brother Matt Deen.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".