But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.” (Acts 17:6)

Paul and his missionary companions turned the world upside down when they proclaimed “God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27). Jesus turned the values of the world upside down in the first words of his public ministry when he proclaimed the paradox of who will be truly happy when the reign of God arrives. Like the psalms, descriptions of true happiness with a veiled exhortation to live the values proclaimed (e.g. Psalm 1, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked” or Psalm 40 “Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud.” They describe true happiness in the present with a promise of fulfillment in God’s future.

The first four Beatitudes express the paradox that passive sufferers are those who are truly happy: the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek and those who hunger and thirst for justice while the second set proclaim that happiness is found among those who help them, the merciful (i.e. those who bring saving help), the pure of heart, the peace makers and those who are persecuted in their quest for justice. Jesus then challenges his disciples directly with a ninth beatitude that spells out the cost of discipleship: verbal abuse, persecution through false accusations like the prophets before them but with the promise of heavenly reward.

Justice concludes each group of four. Though often translated as righteousness and interpreted as an individual quality biblical justice is not simply an individual living in right relation to a loving God, but also seeking to witness and strive for the embodiment of God’s justice (making the world “right” with God). The power of the beatitudes is vivid when we think, as does the Gospel of Luke, of the attitudes opposed to them (6:20, blessed are you who weep versus woe to you who laugh). Today “anti-beatitudes” seem to flourish: standing against the poor in spirit are the greedy and those who revel in their wealth; the mockers dismiss those who grieve over the evil enveloping our world; and the violent have no respect for the meek and powerless, while those who hunger and thirst for justice are rejected and ignored. The
merciful who practice forgiveness and build bridges are marginalized by the angry and vengeful, while those whose lives are centered on God (pure of heart) are overwhelmed by massive marketing of pseudo paths toward happiness, and the peacemakers seem powerless in the face of the lovers of violence and war.

Simply put these blessings of Jesus are the entrance challenges for the kind of life that Jesus will embody throughout the Gospel of Matthew. But they are not simply demands but also gifts. Each of the two panels of the beatitudes ends with the phrase “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Though frequently seen as a promise of heavenly reward in contrast to present suffering, “the kingdom of heaven” means also that God’s values and God’s power are manifest among suffering and the marginalized people. As our country moves to a governing administration which in some respects appears as a parade example of “anti-beatitudes,” followers of the life and teaching of Jesus are summoned to be a “contrast society,” that lives and embodies the values of the beatitudes. But having heard the initial words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew on this Sunday we also live by his final promise, “I am with you all days until the completion of the world (28:20).

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