

Rev. Kate LeFranc

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### “Blessed Are the Cheese Makers”

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

It probably says a lot about me that, alongside Sesame Street and 3-2-1 Contact, my parents raised me on the British comedy group Monty Python. They made tapes from their records and cut out the naughty bits, and taped their shows off TV. So my sister and I grew up with that smart and biting sarcasm and absurdity – that was essential cultural knowledge!

They made movies too, in addition to their TV show, and after the success of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* poking fun at Arthurian legends, they set their sights on Jesus and the New Testament era. But they realized that there wasn't actually very much to satirize in Jesus' teachings – that this was pretty good stuff! – and so they told the story of a guy named Brian, born on the same day as Jesus a few stables down the road. He spends most of his movie (called *The Life of Brian*) trying to convince people that he's *not* the messiah.

Brian only actually encounters Jesus once during the movie – he finds himself standing with his mother at the back of the crowd straining to hear Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, of which these verses are a part. In the midst of the chatter and fairly unpeaceful argument that breaks out around them, someone calls up, “What was that?” and a man further up turns around saying, “I think it was ‘blessed are the cheese makers.’”

A wealthy woman standing near them says, with some amount of outrage, “What's so special about the *cheese* makers??” And her husband answers, very matter-of-fact, “Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally; it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.”

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We're pretty good at trying to make sense of things, aren't we? Even the most absurd and counter-intuitive statements, if they come from a source we've decided to trust, will get pulled and stretched in our rhetorical gymnastics until the words can mostly fit into our world view without too much cognitive dissonance. And even when (we think) we've heard them correctly, we smooth over the rough edges of these words until they no longer startle us with how different they are from the world we understand.

We hear “blessed are the peacemakers, the meek, the persecuted,” and we relax – we've heard this before. That's nothing new. Surely, it refers to some kind of future, far-off blessing, that we can't quite visualize – it doesn't quite make sense in the context of the world we know (the *real* world) to say that those who suffer and those who put the needs of others before their own are now God's favored ones, happy and blessed.

The Greek word here, *makarioi* – blessed ones – was usually used for kings and aristocrats, the

wealthy and powerful. It was even sometimes used in a form of address and respect, as in “my good sir.” *Obviously* those people were happy, and favored by God. The concept was very us-and-them; in the same way we might talk today about the “haves and have-nots.” Those folks, the happy ones, have clearly been blessed by God in a way that we regular folks have not.

In many ways that prevailing idea of blessedness paralleled what we know today as the “prosperity gospel” – a pernicious theological trend in mostly low-income congregations that equates God’s favor with material wealth and comfort. It means, in practice, that pastors who preach this concept become incredibly wealthy at the expense of their struggling congregants, desperate to earn back God’s favor with their financial gifts to the church.

But even those of us outside those “prosperity gospel” churches can so easily fall victim to this kind of thinking. Material comfort and security are just basic to our happiness and well-being. And even while we might concern ourselves with the needs of others, it seems like we don’t know how to talk about it except in those us-and-them kinds of terms. We have food, and we go to feed “the hungry.” Our needs are met, and we share with “the needy.” Even as we concern ourselves with “those less fortunate,” we can still be thinking of ourselves, by contrast, as “more fortunate”... “more blessed.”

And Jesus’ words, if we can hear them, turn that world upside down. In these simple words that we know so well, Jesus takes all the class-based hierarchical implications of the word “blessed,” and he paints a picture of a whole new system. The special ones in *my* kingdom, he says, are the poor ones. The suffering ones, the persecuted ones. Jesus is not just including those who have been left out; he is talking about upending the whole social order.

Which, let’s face it, is a little hard to swallow. No wonder we’ve misheard and toned down and skimmed over these words over the years. Why on earth would Jesus be saying that the peacemakers are the special ones?? That’s certainly not what we see in our world – usually it seems like peacemakers devote their lives to futile tasks, all their good works are overshadowed or undone by the complicated reality of the situation, or the greed of humanity; and maybe if they have a bit of success, once the world starts to notice, they wind up getting assassinated.

Peacemakers – *blessed*?? No, he must have said “cheese makers.” They put in an honest day’s work, after all, and maybe God just really likes a good brie. That must be it.

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Today is Super Bowl Sunday – and I’m not talking (yet) about the special collection for the Souper Bowl of Caring. Today is one of the biggest secular holidays of the year, as almost 50% of American eyes are trained on this field in New Jersey for the last NFL game of the season. It seems like there’s always a controversy of some sort, and this year it’s Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman. As so many athletes seem to, he’s got a bit of an attitude, which has been splashed across the media pretty dramatically in the last few weeks.

And yet along with it, he’s got a bachelor’s degree from Stanford (and the beginning of a Masters’), and an intelligent and biting wit he uses to respond to his critics with class and self-possession. With his working-class and street-wise Compton background, combined with his financial success in

professional sports, which he funnels back into his charity Blanket Coverage, which provides school supplies and clothing to children at risk, he defies all our cultural expectations of what a young African-American man is supposed to do and sound like.

Football is an acceptable way to earn some money, isn't it – but then he should really just be quiet and humble about it. Perhaps an Ivy League degree, but in that case we'd prefer he just pick a nice middle-class career and not stir things up too much. Certainly this kind of adrenaline-fueled trash talk is reserved for white athletes who don't scare us quite so much.

But Sherman is his own unique and complicated person, who doesn't fit neatly into any of the roles that mainstream America would allow him. And so we do our best to push and pull him back into the things that make sense to us, calling him a thug and violent and ungrateful, because that's what we're used to.

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We hear God's call on our lives, and it is so different from the world we know that we have trouble even understanding the words sometimes. That can't possibly be what Jesus means, can it?? God's way turns the world on its head, and that is unsettling at best.

Jesus stands in a long line of Hebrew prophets before him, sent to bring the people back to God's ways. And we struggle and fumble and argue, trying to make sense of words we know deep down are holy words, but which challenge us to new ways of thinking and being – and that is *hard*.

And so we build up buildings and traditions and structures, because those are familiar, and we fret about what rituals and patterns are most pleasing to God. We run ourselves ragged with worry – God, what can we offer you to make you happy with us?? Can we build bigger temples and bring bigger offerings?

But God answers, over and over, in the voices of all God's prophets, "I have told you what is good." I don't want your sacrifices, I don't want your rituals, I don't want your academic learning or your pomp and circumstance. What I want from you, says God, is to seek the justice I have taught you, love the kindness I have shown you, and to set aside your pride and walk in my ways.

That's it. And that is everything.