

The Key To Serenity

On Sunday, we launched a new sermon series called “Journeying With Jesus.” We began with some of Jesus’ most famous words, The Beatitudes.

1. Warm-up Question: At the outset on Sunday, Jeff quoted a Tim McGraw song called “Live Like You Were Dying.” McGraw’s song makes a powerful point about living well. What’s one of your favorite popular songs that has a deep message?
2. In McGraw’s song, someone who received a devastating health diagnosis is asked how he responded to the bad news. He replies, “I went skydiving; I went Rocky Mountain climbing; I went two-point-seven seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu. And I loved deeper, and I spoke sweeter, and I gave forgiveness I’d been denying.” Then he says, “I hope someday you get the chance to live like you were dying.”
 - a. Suppose you got a devastating health diagnosis. How do you think you’d react?
 - b. All of us hope to live wonderful, happy lives. Yet circumstances constantly challenge our happiness. Thus far in your journey, what has been the single biggest challenge to your serenity?
3. Read Matthew 5:1-11. Jesus spoke these words to a crowd of largely lower-class peasant families who subsisted on farming, fishing, and trading goods. In that culture, women were regarded as their husband’s property, children were seldom educated and put to work early, men had to toil long hours in the hot sun, Roman taxes were high, and life expectancy was short. No plumbing, no electricity, no heat or air conditioning, no cushy furniture, no mass entertainment, no modern medicine.
 - a. Yet Jesus had the audacity to tell these people that they could experience the “bliss of the gods.” The word translated “blessed” comes from the Greek word *makarios* (mak-AR-ee-os), the same word Greek and Roman writers used to refer to “the highest state of happiness and wellbeing; the bliss of the gods.” As his listeners heard Jesus tell them that they could achieve the highest state of happiness, what thoughts and feelings do you suppose his words evoked in them?
 - b. The closest English word to *makarios* is probably “serenity.” The closest Hebrew word is probably *shalom*, which means wholeness, peace, tranquility, rest, harmony, absence of agitation.” How would you rate your own level of makarios/shalom/serenity on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest)? Explain your rating.
4. It’s natural for us to assume that serenity is found in making life the way we wish it was. The left hand column below describes life the way we wish it was. The right hand column describes the opposite challenges – which are precisely the 8 things Jesus describes in the Beatitudes as the doorways through which we move to serenity:

How We Wish Things Were

No spiritual struggles or shame
No sadness
No powerlessness
No injustice
No one who wants to hurt me
No sense of being torn in different directions
No war
No prejudice and discrimination

How Things Are

Poverty of spirit, vs. 3
Mourning, vs. 4
Meekness, i.e., powerlessness, vs. 5
Scarcity of rightness, i.e., justice, vs. 6
The need to be merciful, vs. 7
Struggle to be pure, i.e., singleness of focus, vs. 8
The need to be a peacemaker, vs. 9
Persecution, vs. 10-11

Which of these 8 doorways to serenity is most challenging to you personally?

5. Oddly enough, in the Beatitudes, Jesus says we achieve serenity (i.e., the bliss of the gods) by embracing and pushing through the very things we think are most inconsistent with our happiness. To try to understand how this works, we dug into the first two Beatitudes. **First Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**
 - a. Many of us have learned the opposite – that true happiness comes from becoming spiritually rich, spiritual giants, almost perfect. If you’ve ever experienced that kind of teaching, did it make your life better and happier? Why or why not?
 - b. Read Luke 18:9-14. What do you think it felt like to be the Pharisee? How much serenity do you think he had? What do you think it felt like to be the tax collector? How much serenity do you think he had?
 - c. Jeff told of a scene from the movie *Because of Winn-Dixie* where the old lady explains all the bottles on her tree to little Opal. Tell us about some of the bottles on your tree. What are some of your greatest points of “spiritual poverty”?
 - d. Why is a keen awareness of our spiritual poverty so key to personal serenity?
6. **Second Beatitude: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”**
 - a. There is a natural human tendency to want to avoid pain – run from it, deny it, bury it deep inside. Why is that?
 - b. Jesus seems to indicate that looking our pain in the eye and allowing ourselves to experience it in all its rawness is necessary to finding genuine comfort. Why?
 - c. What are some keys to learning how to mourn well?
 - d. An HBO documentary described a piece of performance art by Marian Abramovic where she gazed silently into the eyes of strangers. Many broke into tears. “As people quieted themselves,” Abramovic said, “I could sense the deep, lonely pain many carry.” Tell us about something that’s been a source of deep pain in your life. Do you feel you’ve fully allowed yourself to mourn that terrible experience? Why or why not?