

Clackamas United Church of Christ
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Beatitudes

Today we start a sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus takes his disciples up a mountain to deliver his most important teachings. In fact, throughout Christian history, thousands of books have been written on the Sermon on the Mount. And I want you to know that I read all of them this last week. So I hope you are ready for the next 3 hours. Don't worry, you will be home in time for the Super Bowl ... maybe ... go commercials.

Speaking of the Super Bowl, I came across a story this last week about a woman named Katie Sowers. Katie is a coach for the San Francisco 49ers. There was a story about her going around social media last week. And I thought, "Oh, that's cool. There's a woman coaching a football team, and that team made it to the Super Bowl. That's a big win for equality. Many churches still won't allow women to teach men about religion, and here's a woman teaching men about football. In many ways, sports are ahead of the church. So, good for you Katie Sowers."

But when I clicked on the link and read about her story, it was even more interesting than that!

Katie went to Goshen College in Indiana, where she played on a basketball scholarship. When her eligibility ran out in 2009, she applied to be a volunteer basketball coach for the school's women's team.

Katie was a good player and a good teammate, but she had one problem for being a coach at Goshen. Katie is a lesbian.

When she applied, the coach told her that a lot of parents were worried "about their daughter being around someone who is gay. That's not something they would want around the team."

Katie was devastated that her own school that she played so hard for, now rejected her, not because she lacked coaching skills, but because of who she is.

Katie says this about her painful experience, "It was something that I grieved about for a while, but I decided I had to move on."

Indeed, Katie did move on. Being rejected as a basketball coach allowed Katie to explore what she calls her true love - football. When she was a child, Katie loved to play football with the boys in her neighborhood. So after Goshen rejected her, Katie played for the Women's Football Alliance and then was accepted as a coach for the Atlanta Falcons.

Eventually, Katie landed a job with the San Francisco 49ers and in a few hours she will be the first female to coach a team in the Super Bowl.

Which is cool, but the reason I'm telling you this is because Katie has been getting a lot of attention this week. When NBC Sports asked her about her feelings for Goshen now, Katie says, "I loved my time at Goshen and I love everything Goshen College represents. This moment was tough, but the reality is we all experience rejection and adversity in our lives."

Now, I don't know anything about Katie's religious beliefs. I don't know if she goes to church or has any belief in Jesus or if she has ever heard the Sermon on the Mount. But what I do know is that her response to being rejected is a sign that she lives the beatitudes that Jesus taught.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," says Jesus.

Someone may think it's a stretch to claim that Katie was persecuted because she was rejected by her school. But the fact remains that 28 states, including Indiana where Katie's college is, still do not have state laws that protect our LGBTQ siblings from discrimination when it comes to "employment, housing, public accommodations" and "other forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation."

But notice how Katie responds without a sense of hatred or retaliation. She doesn't hold Goshen's decision in 2009 against the school. In fact, she says she loved her experience there.

Jesus' ethic in the Beatitudes is non-retaliation. Katie was able to respond to this painful experience by moving on and trusting that something bigger would happen in her life.

Frequently when bad things happen in our lives, we have two options. We can get bitter or we can get better. Katie chose to get better.

But I also want you to notice something else Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

The word righteousness is generally thought of as a religious term. Righteousness is about a right relationship with God. But in the original Greek language, the word righteousness comes from the word *dikaiosine*. It can be translated as righteousness with God, or right relationship with God. But it can also be translated as justice, or having just relationships with others.

So, does this sound different to you, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled"?

When Jesus calls us to be non-retaliatory, it does not mean that we just sit back and let the injustice of the world fly by.

In a country where more than half the states in our union do not protect our LGBTQ siblings from discrimination, do you hunger and thirst to make our country more just for our LGBTQ siblings? Blessed are you.

Jesus also says, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” But Jesus did not make peace with violence or with war. In fact, he resisted both at every turn. We have the largest military the world has ever seen, and if Democrats and Republicans agree on anything, it’s that we need to spend even more money on our military to expand it so that we can retaliate or, when we see fit, we can strike first. But Jesus flips that mentality upside down. That is not how you make true peace, according to Jesus. And so blessed are you when you make peace, not through violence or war or revenge, but through nonviolent peaceful means.

And I’ll end with this, Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

I think this is so key. Throughout the Bible God is associated with mercy. In fact, the prophet Hosea says that God desires mercy, not sacrificial violence. Why is that? Because God is mercy. The word for mercy in Hebrew is chesed. It means mercy, but can also be translated as “steadfast love.” So God desires steadfast love. Why is that? Because as the First Letter of John says, God is love. And so blessed are you when you show steadfast love, for you will receive steadfast love.

That’s the spiritual physics of Christianity. You see, Jesus is inviting us to participate in the very life of God. When you allow the divine life to flow through you, you allow God’s steadfast love and mercy to flow through you. Like Katie, we can respond to slights or disappointments by grieving and then moving on one step at a time, trusting in the way of God’s love and justice. Because here’s the basic law of spiritual physics, the more divine steadfast love you give away, the more divine steadfast love enters your heart.

The Sermon on the Mount in general, and the Beatitudes in particular, are some of Jesus’ most radical and difficult teachings. But they are guided by one thing: God’s non-retaliatory, war-ending, justice-seeking, steadfast love, precisely because God is steadfast love. And so, friends, May we receive that love and share it with one another now and forevermore. Amen.