

After the Storm: Who Do You Want to Be?
Matthew 5:1-16

There is that one unforgettable line that comes at the end of a Mary Oliver poem. It goes like this: *What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* And it's a great challenge for us, isn't it, to be reminded that we have just one life that is ours to make something of, to remember that each moment of this life is precious, to think that we can be free to choose for ourselves, to make our lives wild and extravagant, rather than conventional and measured. And maybe you have thought about how you would answer that question for yourself. Maybe early in your life someone asked you who or what you wanted to be when you were all grown up; or maybe you took a course sometime on writing a mission statement for your own life; and ever since then, you've had a picture in your head of your ideal life, or a set of goals that has motivated and inspired you.

Even if you are not conscious of having done that, I bet somewhere buried deep inside of you, you have a picture of what success looks like for you, a good life. Maybe it's measured by doing what you enjoy, or by what you've produced, or by what your children will accomplish--because that too says something about who you are. Knowing who we would like to be, what we'd like our lives to look like, is a good thing. In fact, it's critical for every one of us in our human development: to create for ourselves an identity that guides our actions. Expanding on the work of the great psychologist Carl Jung, Richard Rohr says, in his book *Falling Upward*, that this is the work of the whole first half of our lives: to sift through our experiences and adopt the traditions, loyalties, authority that matter to us; to find a self-image, a sense of right and wrong, an identity—all those things become our own inner voice.

Along the way, we are likely to incorporate into that voice in our heads some messages that come from our culture:

Do everything you can to be rich and powerful—or at least rich and powerful enough that you never have to depend on anyone else.
Avoid loss at all costs, and then if it does happen, toughen up and be strong, so that you don't feel it too much.
Take care of yourself and make your own happiness.
If someone strikes out at you—physically, verbally, whatever—strike back quickly.
Your life should be on an ascending path: always upward and onward.

These get-tough-do-it-yourself messages can work for us for a while. They make us conscientious, responsible, self-sufficient. They keep us striving, on the road toward the destiny we have chosen for ourselves.

And then, for all of us at one time or another, a storm hits. It can appear in a thousand different disguises: the death of someone you loved and needed, fear that comes with illness, a life-shaping disappointment. Maybe it's being rejected by an institution or people that meant a great deal to you. The inability to make a relationship work, no matter how much you wanted it. The failure to beat into submission your own self-destructive tendencies or habit or addiction.

We are not in charge of our destiny, it turns out. The world is broken, full of pieces and fragments and scraps with sharp edges that cannot be glued back together. We are broken. We cannot complete the picture we had for our lives, no matter how well we had drawn it in our heads. The agenda we had created for ourselves falls apart under the weight of real life.

No matter how disappointed we might be to acknowledge these contradictions and disappointments about life—about our lives—God is not shocked by them. It's like God never expected everything to go right. I think this is what Jesus was trying to say in the Beatitudes, those eight rules of life that he spoke up on the mountain, surrounded by broken people just like you and me.

Are you discouraged about your own life, at the end of your rope? [he asked] Maybe that's a good thing. Now can you begin to see how much you need God.

Have you lost what was most dear to you? Even in your loss there is a blessing embedded. Let yourself be embraced.

Have you given up hope that you'll ever be someone better or bigger than who you are right now? It's OK; now maybe you can be content, and focus on the things that matter more.

Are you weighed down by all you see in the world that you can't fix? Let it remind you that you don't have to be God. The same one who cares for you cares for all of the rest of creation too.

Does the outside world look tarnished and dingy to you? That's because it is. But if you work on getting your own mind and heart right, you will see it with new eyes, and it will look different to you.

People will always compete and fight. Just keep working with me for peace, showing them what it looks like to cooperate instead.

And I don't expect any of this will make sense in the world [Jesus said]. In fact, you're likely to be ridiculed, told you're unrealistic, maybe even penalized for playing by different rules. If that happens, it's because you belong to God...and that is just where you want to be.

Often we read the Beatitudes as if Jesus were telling us we *should* be poor in spirit, mournful, meek, persecuted. But I don't think that's what he was saying at all. I think he was saying, brokenness happens. It happens all by itself. That's what life brings us; it is the *now* that is given to all of us. What he was announcing, and what is really the good news for us in his Sermon on the Mount, is this: When our vision for our own life fails us, when we cannot resolve or fix the failures and losses and disappointments that will inevitably come, when our inner voice is not enough to steer us clear of all the wrongs in life, there is a deeper voice we can rely on. It is God's voice, and it is full of grace. It's not fragile or brittle; it is strong. It can hold contradictions and exceptions to the rules when everything else fails. It holds our reality—the messed up truth of our lives—not by wiping out the brokenness or carrying off the broken pieces, but by holding brokenness and healing both, cradling the dark and the light at the same

time. That voice tells us that it is safe to risk, to trust, to surrender...to whatever circumstances life brings us, knowing that we are held, and blessed, even so.

It seems to me that God is quite at ease with human imperfection. In fact, it seems that God moves *toward* brokenness and poverty and failure, doesn't wait for us to fix ourselves or our circumstances before he comes alongside of us and calls us to come out of the shadows. Maybe that's why forgiveness plays such a central role in the tradition of our faith. God has had a lot of practice at picking us up and standing us on our feet again.

Maybe that's part of what it means for us to grow into the image of God: to learn how to handle the imperfection, the brokenness, that is everywhere—especially our own. If we too can learn to hold the contradictions of our lives together, dark and light, beautiful and not-so-much, without losing faith, we too will find ourselves blessed.

And when we have forgiven ourselves for being imperfect and broken, then we can forgive just about everyone else too. We can see clearly without being shocked or closing our hearts. That's what Jesus meant when he talked to his followers about being salt and light in the world. Followers of Jesus are people who understand that there is a different kind of well-being that is possible, freedom and joy that do not depend on a diet of constant success. And so, these followers bring a different perspective wherever they go. Like salt that brings out the best flavors in food, they bring out the best in the people and communities around them, because they are not afraid of making a mistake or falling short or losing status. Like light, they illuminate not themselves, but what is around them, telling the truth, holding up what needs attention.

They are—we can be—people who make a difference, creative non-conformists, catalysts for change. Simply by being who we are, living boldly, freely, not afraid to live *visibly* the truth we have experienced for ourselves: that God can take loss and hardship and struggle—even the broken pieces of life—and make them the raw materials of goodness and kindness, renewal and blessing.