

ALTERNATIVE FACTS

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 5:1-12

Last Sunday, Kellyanne Conway—whose job title in the White House is “Counselor to the President”—appeared on the talk show Meet the Press. The host of Meet the Press, Chuck Todd, asked Mrs. Conway about the disputed claim made the day before by the White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, about the size of the crowd at the inauguration. Conway staunchly defended Spicer saying, “You’re saying it’s a falsehood...¹ Sean Spicer, our Press Secretary, gave **alternative facts** to that.” Across the country, ears perked up as people said, “huh?” For most of us, facts are facts. There are not alternative facts.

The size of the inauguration crowd is simply not important in the governance of our nation but it is a bit curious to hear a person at the top rank of the government claim that facts are fungible. I would put this to the test, but I doubt they would be so accommodating when, in April, I file my “alternative” income tax form.

This phrase alternative facts is now part of our political lexicon. It even has a wikipedia entry. While we may get a chuckle out of its use last Sunday, the truth is that we in the church have been dealing with alternative facts from the beginning. Our faith is built on alternative facts. We just haven’t called them that. We may say a ‘new reality’ or an ‘alternate reality.’ The book of Revelation describes the “new heaven and new earth.” The Gospel of John tells of “eternal life.” The promise of our faith hinges on the promise that the reality we inhabit is not our only option, it is the result of our sin, that God desires that we inhabit not this world, but the kingdom of heaven. The presence of the kingdom of heaven is an alternative fact.

Our reading today is the first part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. You will recall that we studied its cousin in Luke, the Sermon on the Plain, last year. The Sermon on the Mount comprises all of the chapter 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew’s gospel and we will be looking at it over the next couple of weeks.

The Sermon on the Mount takes place early in this gospel. So far, Matthew has provided us with accounts of Jesus’ birth, the visit of the magi, the holy family’s flight to Egypt, and their return. Then there is Jesus’ baptism by John and Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Then, as we read last week, Jesus calls the first disciples with the words *Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*

¹(omitted) and they’re giving--

Jesus has begun his ministry and has been traveling through Galilee teaching, preaching, and healing. Because of his activities, great crowds are attracted to him.

As we read today, at one point, when Jesus encounters these crowds, he retreats up a mountain (we would call it a hill). He sits down and his disciples gather around him, and begins to teach. He offers them ten statements. Nine of these begin with the word *blessed*. *Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn*, and so on. We call this section the Beatitudes because in the Latin translation of the Bible, the word *beatus* is used. From *beatus*, we get *beatitude*.

In Greek, the gospel's original language, the word for blessed is *makarios*. We do not do this word justice to simply translate it as blessed. There is no good word in English that conveys its nuances as Jesus uses it. In other Bible translations you may find this word translated as fortunate or happy. One scholar argues for the word lucky, as in "Lucky are those who mourn. The best thing to do is to take all these words and throw them into a blender and push puree. A cup of blessed, three tablespoons of fortunate, a teaspoon of happy, with a pinch of lucky. That would give you a fair meaning of *makarios*."

With this word, Jesus teaches those on the hill how he expects them to lead their lives, how they are to present themselves before God. They are to be poor in spirit, they are to mourn, they are to be meek, they are to hunger and thirst for righteousness, they are to be merciful, they are to be pure in heart, they are to be peacemakers, they will be persecuted. This is just the beginning of several long chapters of Jesus' teachings. But here, in bullet points, at the start of Jesus' ministry, he outlines his expectations to those who would follow him.

Jesus' first message to the world, as we read last week, is *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*. It is through Jesus that people can access the kingdom. Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John away from their jobs as fishermen and offered them a new life—a life teaching the world of God's kingdom. Jesus doesn't describe the kingdom but he does describe those who will enter it. They won't be those who are arrogant, who act strong, who celebrate, who lie and deceive, who show no empathy, who promote conflict, who are satisfied and satiated. These are the people who can get into the best restaurants but they are not the ones you will find seated in the kingdom. There the tables are reserved for the humble, the meek, and those who seek justice.

In the present reality of this world, the rewards go to the strong, the powerful, the influential, the winners. But Jesus offers alternative facts, an alternative reality, a new way of living—life in God's kingdom.

The church, through its history, has a less-than-spotless record. But over the centuries, many have striven to follow Jesus' call to discipleship.

For example, today, the Presbyterian Church—our denomination—has active programs to alleviate hunger and address domestic violence. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance goes into areas hit by tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, and more. Presbyterians have built hospitals around the world and developed strong medical mission programs. We've also built schools around the world through our commitment to education. We currently have mission workers stationed in 50 countries. As our congregation knows, the church has a program that installs water purification systems and solar power in underserved communities.

All these things are our way of bringing to the world the vision of a new reality—the kingdom of heaven. When we look carefully, we can see evidence of the kingdom breaking through.

Finally, I want to get back to that word blessed. Jesus made it sound as if we are in charge, as if, if we are merciful then we will receive mercy, if we are pure in heart, then we will see God, if we are poor in spirit, then ours is the kingdom of heaven. Some may read that to mean that if we just work hard enough at being poor in spirit, if we strive to be the best at meekness, then we be rewarded, we'll get that seat in the kingdom. But in the end, that word blessed may indeed be the best word because it is a reminder that God actively offers blessings. These are not blessings that we earn, they are gifts. And more importantly, they are power. God's blessings set us apart from those who are simply doing good things. They make us God's agents. When Jesus called the fishermen, he was blessing them. As the book of Isaiah pointed out, God's spirit rests upon God's servants.

My word to you is that you are God's servants and you are blessed. This isn't a message that people hear too often, that God's spirit rests upon us. Use this power to live the reality of the kingdom and to open its doors for others. That is what Jesus meant when he told Peter, *I will make you fish for people*. You may call this an alternative fact. It is and it is true.