

BLESSED ARE THE TACKLED

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Grace Church in New York
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Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." (Luke 6:20-21)

Let me begin with a confession. I enjoy reading the obituaries in the newspaper, usually over my bowl of breakfast cereal. Why? It's not that I derive any sort of pleasure from someone's death. Rather, it's a chance to see what a person made of his or her life. What was the big story? Take, for example, Dicky Maegle, who died last July at the age of 86. In 1954 Maegle was a college football player – an all-American running back at Rice University. That year Rice earned a trip to the Cotton Bowl to face Alabama on New Year's Day. As it turned out, one accidental play of the game would become the big story of Maegle's life.

In the second quarter Rice was backed up against their own 5-yard line. At the snap Maegle took a handoff, and started an end sweep down the right sideline. After getting a key block he was off to the races, sprinting past the Alabama bench with open field in front of him. It looked for sure to be a 95-yard touchdown run. On the Alabama bench a fullback named Tommy Lewis could not bear to watch what was unfolding before his eyes. Lewis was not in the game at the moment and had even removed his helmet. But when he saw Maegle come racing by with no one to tackle him, Lewis leaped illegally onto the field, did the job himself, then scurried back to the bench and tried to hide. Of course, Maegle was awarded the touchdown, and Rice went on to win the game.

The play has gone down as one of the most bizarre in football history, and both Maegle and Lewis appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show a few days later. Maegle played another year of college ball, then was a first-round draft pick by the San Francisco 49ers. He played seven seasons in the NFL before retiring. But no matter what he did, Maegle would complain that being tackled by Lewis was all that anyone remembered about him. People encouraged him to laugh – it was just a game. But Maegle wasn't laughing. *"I led the nation in punt returns. I led the nation in yards per carry. I led the conference in rushing and in scoring. But when people introduce me, all they ever mention is what happened in that game."*¹ Sadly, Maegle's obituary was all about "that game."

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we've heard the portion of Christ's Sermon on the Plain called the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are part of a sermon, or a distillation of many sermons that Jesus preached. In the sermon he pronounced God's blessings to be upon people you would never imagine to be blessed, or fortunate, or happy. *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven."* There you have the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain.

"But wait," you say. "Sermon on the Plain? I thought the Beatitudes were in the Sermon on the Mount." You're right: the Beatitudes are in the Sermon on the Mount according to the Gospel of Matthew. But Biblical scholars suggest that Matthew's Beatitudes may be the more housebroken version compared to Luke's. In Matthew, Jesus is removed from the people, on a mount, speaking to the 12 disciples only, pronouncing blessings in the third-person. Matthew's first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," is much more palatable for people of means than Luke's blunt, "Blessed are you who are poor." Matthew's Beatitudes have been more popular for good reason. They fit nicely

onto sheet music, and into the stained glass parameters of polite spirituality. They give no undue offense.

Luke's words, however, are a harder, tougher, more direct account of the sermon. Jesus comes down from the mount, and gets in our face, speaking in the second person – to you, not them. Blessed are you who have been tackled unjustly and illegally by poverty, hunger, hatred, and exclusion. What is more, the accompanying “woes” turn up the heat even further. Woe to you who are doing the tackling and trying to hide. To be sure, Luke's Beatitudes are good news for the downtrodden, but if at all possible we'd rather not be counted among them. Blessed are you who are poor, you who are hungry, you who weep, and you whom people hate? With blessings like these, who needs curses? Or, in the words of the late Mae West, a movie star of the 1930's, “I've been poor, and I've been rich. Believe me: rich is better.” Strong, successful, and fleet of foot is better. Dicky Maegle wanted to be remembered for his rushing and scoring, not for being tackled once. He wanted a different legacy, a different image, and so do we.

Last year, in the thick of the pandemic, with all the extra time I became quite devoted to bike riding. I would join the cool kids racing around the Central Park loop – they on their high-end, light-weight carbon fiber road bikes, me on my vintage Raleigh that is twice the weight of theirs. It was so much fun that I decided to keep it up through the winter, which meant getting all sorts of cold weather gear, and riding a different bike, more appropriate for snow and slush. This bike – a Trek hybrid that I've owned for many years – didn't have toe clips. For the uninitiated, toe clips hold your feet to the pedals and make for a better, more efficient ride. So I added the toe clips and off I went.

Drawing near Central Park I came to a red light. I slowed down and stopped, then attempted to put my foot down. But – oops – I had forgotten the toe clips. I was unused to having them on the Trek, and when my foot did not come off the pedal I tipped over in slow motion and crashed to the pavement in a heap. What was my very first concern? Not, am I hurt? Not, did I damage the bike? No, my first concern was whether or not anyone in all the waiting traffic had seen me fall. I sprang to my feet and got back on the bike as quickly as possible as if nothing had happened – as if, strangely, I'd actually meant to tip over. I mean, God forbid that people might think I'd been laid low by a toe clip. God forbid that I should need someone's help.

Isn't it a shame? We have so bought into the world's standards of success that Christ's Beatitudes are foreign to our daily living. We can't admit to the failure that's required to embrace them. We don't ask for help when we need it. Our culture pressures us to be strong, to keep up appearances, and to shake off grief and pain. Thanks for the blessings, Jesus, but perhaps you should save them for people who really need them. *Me? I'm fine. Have a nice day.* Somehow the reliance on human strength has seduced even those who claim to be followers of Jesus. “The Lord helps those who help themselves,” is a phrase I've heard many good Christian people put into the mouth of Jesus. The trouble is, Jesus never said the words. You will find no such verse anywhere in the Bible. And nothing could be further from the gospel of grace that Jesus preached and lived.

Luke is clear that Jesus stood on a level place when he preached the Beatitudes. It's as if he wanted to look the people right in the eyes and say, “Let me level with you. The Lord helps those who know they need help. The Lord helps those who seek God's mercy and rely on God's strength.” Jesus blessed the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the unjustly reviled not because he wanted to romanticize these conditions, or in any way encourage us to be stuck there. Poverty and hunger and hatred are awful. Likewise, all of heaven surely rejoices when people strive to be the best possible stewards of the time, talents, and treasure that God has given them. But in the end, God sides with the tackled and the toppled. Why? Because these folks have already learned the true nature of their relationship with God. We are all utterly dependent on the grace of God for life itself. “We blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree, then wither and perish.” We are mortal, formed on the earth, and unto the earth we return. What will save us then? Our wealth and resources? Our records and

reputations? Relying on these is a delusion. Those who have been blindsided by injustice, brought down by hatred and exclusion, or laid low by disease and death often – not always, but often – have given up the notion that they are their own saviors. Because they are not clinging to this life, they are open to receiving new life, the life of Christ, the resurrection.

Still, we wonder and worry about the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, or rich is better? Who is the false prophet: Jesus or Mae West? In today's reading from First Corinthians (15:12-20), St. Paul addresses the question of credibility. He writes candidly about the resurrection faith of Christians: *If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised ... Our faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God. If, for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.* I take St. Paul to mean that without the resurrection, Jesus himself and those who proclaim him are the false prophets. Without the resurrection the Beatitudes are backwards madness – no way to live your life. *But, St. Paul wrote on, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.* If he's right, then the Beatitudes aren't madness at all, and you need not worry if the big story of your life reflects them.

At the beginning of the sermon I confessed that I enjoyed reading obituaries because they tell the story of people's lives. Here's an odd question for you: how do you think the obituary of Jesus would read? Nearly a century ago a Canadian preacher by the name of James Allen Francis wrote a sermon that included some words that might suffice, even though he did not intend them to be an obituary of Jesus. The piece has become quite well known, and is often entitled "One Solitary Life."

He was born in an obscure village, the son of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village, where he worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he became a wandering preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn't go to college. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He did none of those things one usually associates with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies and went through a mockery of a trial. He was executed by the state. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Several days later some women who had come to the tomb to anoint his body were told that he had risen from the dead.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of human history. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of people on this earth as much as this One Solitary Life.

Clearly, the Beatitudes were written large across Jesus' life. If you suspect they may be the big story of your life, take heart. Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. So, blessed are you who are tackled and toppled. *"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven."*

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¹ "Dicky Maegle, 86, Star Tackled by Opponent Who Left Bench, Dies," by Richard Goldstein. *The New York Times*, July 9, 2021.