

Epiphany 4A
Matthew 5:1-12
Rev. Bonnie Underwood
January 29, 2017

Confessing the Beatitudes, a Skit

This Sunday, our youth performed a skit adapted from the work of Gusti Linnea Newquist, a co-pastor of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, who created these skits as part of Confessing the Beatitudes, a series of lessons on the Beatitudes.

The cast was as follows:

Eva as Makaria—a young Jewish woman from Galilee who is destitute
Colleen as Prisca—a Jewish woman; the wife of Aquila, she later co-founds, with her husband, a house church (based on Prisca/Priscilla of Acts 18 and Romans 16:3–5)
Parker as Aquila—a Jewish man; the husband of Prisca, he later cofounds a house church
Lilli as Cornelia—a young Gentile woman; she is the daughter of Cornelius, a Roman centurion (based on the Cornelius of Acts 10)
Andrea as Cornelia's slave, a Gentile woman
Jaden as Peter—a disciple of Jesus
Calvin as Andrew—a disciple of Jesus
Mother Bonnie as Jesus—an itinerant Jewish preacher

Jesus enters and sits center, closing his eyes and praying.

Makaria enters with a basket containing a small piece of bread. She looks around, sees Jesus, and kneels at a distance from him and prays.

Makaria : O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

Makaria continues to pray silently as Prisca and Aquila enter. They have a basket with a whole lunch. She is dragging him along.

Prisca : I know, honey, I know. We've heard so many of these traveling preachers before. But this one is different! Just give him a chance. Fifteen minutes. If you don't like what you hear after fifteen minutes, we'll go back to Jerusalem and that will be that.

Aquila : Fine. Just . . . fine. But don't expect me to do this again, if this guy's a nut like the last one. We've got a family to feed; money is tight and we can't keep hopping around the Holy Land looking for a miracle. Herod's taxes are doing us in. No more travel after this.

Prisca : I know, honey, I know. Just give it one more chance. There he is! Just look at him! He is sooo spiritual! Here's a good spot. We can see him perfectly, without disturbing him.

She spreads a small blanket and sits, offering him some bread.

Prisca : Well, come on, aren't you at least going to eat? **Aquila** : Oh, all right. Fine.
He sits and takes the offered bread.

Prisca (*praying*): Open our hearts, minds and spirits, O Lord, to your word for us today.
Amen.

Cornelia enters with her slave trailing behind her carrying a big basket overflowing with food, and a blanket.

Cornelia : I don't know where I'm supposed to sit. You'd think there would be better crowd control. Hard to believe all these people want to hear some Jewish guy named Jesus. Oh! There he is!

The slave gets her settled and offers her food.

Cornelia : Well, I mean, I really did have to come, didn't I? Everyone is talking about him. And it's not as if we have anything better to do, living out here in the sticks of Galilee. I can't wait until Dad gets transferred to Caesarea. He'll be a real Roman centurion! What an honor!

The slave sits near Makaria. Jesus stands.

Jesus : Blessed are the poor in spirit, the hopeless, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them!

Cornelia : Ha! This guy is nuts! Is he really saying that the destitute are the citizens of heaven?! Are you kidding?! My father is a citizen of Rome. Now that's something to get excited about.

Aquila : You know, that girl is pretty smart, for a Gentile! What is this Jesus guy thinking? You and I both know that the only 'honor' to be found these days is with Rome.

Prisca : You said you'd give him a chance! **Aquila** : I am giving him a chance!

Cornelia's slave: (to Makaria): Did he really just say that we are greatly honored? You? Me? We are the destitute, after all. But I've got to tell you, I don't feel greatly honored. I have to follow this snarky kid around all day and do whatever she tells me to do. Seems to me that they are the ones who have the kingdom of heaven!

Cornelia : I don't need to hear any more of this mumbo jumbo. I'm just going to lie down and take a nap.

Cornelia does lie down, Priscila and Aquila continue eating.

Makaria: (*praying*): Living God, you came to us as an impoverished child, and taught us to honor those who are destitute. Loosen our grip on the things we crave, and teach us to share your good creation with all of your children. In the name of the one born in a manger, we pray. Amen.

She begins to cry, and the Slave moves towards her. **Slave**: What's the matter. Why are you crying? *Makaria turns away, embarrassed.*

Jesus: Blessed are those who weep!

Slave: See, there's nothing to be ashamed of. Tell me what's the matter.

Makaria : It's just . . . well . . . my husband was working on one of the Roman roads through our village. We didn't want him to do it—he hated the Romans—but what choice did he have? And one day he just didn't come back. I don't know why.

Slave : I know the road you're talking about! Cornelia's father was one of the guards there. (*whispering*) He said they had a lot of trouble with that crew. Too much grumbling, too much talk against Rome.

Jesus: God will bring laughter and consolation to those who mourn.

Makaria continues to cry.

Prisca : Oh, child, what's the matter?

Slave: (*whispering*) Her husband was one of the men taken by the Roman guards last week

Prisca: (*praying*) Holy God, we pray for your comforting Spirit, always available to your children in their time of need. Amen.

Cornelia : (*Waking up*) What is all that noise?! I was trying to get some sleep. **Slave** : Oh, nothing. Not to worry.

Prisca : It's not nothing! It's Rome! They take everything from us! Our land, our food, our husbands! They take everything!

Cornelia : Excuse me, but you people wouldn't have anything if it weren't for Rome! No roads, no peace, no food. My dad is the one who has to keep everything safe for you. You aren't Roman Citizens! You have no power!

Jesus : Blessed are those who are humble and meek, for they will inherit the earth. **Cornelia**: Did you hear what he said? That's ridiculous!! Look at her (*Pointing at*

Makaria). She's certainly humble, but there's no way she's inheriting anything! **Aquila** : How dare you!

Prisca : (*To Cornelia*) My dear girl, the husband of this young woman here is one of the men your father arrested. She doesn't know where he is or when he'll come home. That is why she weeps.

Cornelia : That means she's one of them! (*to her Slave*) Come! It's time for us to go. These are not our people.

Cornelia turns and walks away. Her slave does not move. A few moments later Cornelia realizes she is alone. She turns around and sees her slave, Prisca, and Aquila quietly comforting Makaria.

Cornelia (*shouting*): Come on!

Prisca comes up behind Cornelia's slave and puts her arm around her. **Prisca** : Come, dear. You may join us.

Cornelia : She may not join you! She's my slave!

Prisca : No, my dear. She belongs to God. She is nobody's slave.

Cornelia stares dumbfounded at Prisca and her slave as they walk slowly back to Makaria. Prisca, Makaria, Aquila, and Cornelia's slave stand in a circle together, Makaria still crying softly.

Aquila : Open our eyes, oh God, to those humble children of yours who mourn in loss and in protest. Strengthen us to stand with them in love and justice, even as you stand with us. Amen.

Cornelia pauses, and then slowly moves back towards the group. The others welcome her.

The action moves over closer to Jesus. Peter and Andrew stand. Jesus is still praying.

Peter: I don't know, Andrew. Jesus said these humble people like Makaria and Cornelia's Slave are going to inherit the earth, but look at what's happening! The Romans take our land! They take it all! You know that's why Makaria is destitute. Her husband had to work on that road because the Romans already took their land. They had nothing left. They don't inherit the land, they lose the land!

Andrew : I know it might not mean much, Peter . . . but just look down there in the valley. Look at that beautiful valley with all of those people. The Makarias and the Priscas and even the Cornelias. They are all there together in that beautiful valley. Even if it's just for a moment, even if it will end soon . . . that's what Jesus is trying to say. This is where the honor is. It starts right here . . . in this valley . . . and we take it with us wherever we go.

Peter: Maybe

Andrew : What do you see down there? **Peter**: People. So many people.

Andrew : Do you see any Romans?

Peter : Well, yes, of course, there's Cornelia. **Andrew** : What's she doing?

Peter : Well . . . it's hard to say . . . I mean . . . it looks like she's gone back to Makaria. Like she's talking with Prisca. Oh! Wow! Aquila put his arm around her! Makaria put her arm around her! They're taking her back! They're acting like she's one of them!

Andrew : Maybe she is one of them. Maybe she just needed to see. Maybe she was just blind before.

Peter : Almighty God, we are drawn to those in power, and we ignore those who cannot defend themselves. Like Moses at the bush, send us to defend your people who suffer oppression and cannot fight for themselves. Grant us courage to speak justice to the oppressed, even as Christ does. Amen.

Peter and Andrew sit back down. Makaria, Cornelia, Cornelia's slave, Prisca, and Aquila have put their blankets together, sitting around the edges, facing one another. Their food baskets are in the middle.

Prisca : I wish we hadn't already eaten that loaf of bread. We could have shared it with you.

Cornelia : Well, I have plenty. Didn't you see? Sweets and breads and nuts and fish. Makaria, you can have some of mine.

Makaria (*glancing at Cornelia's slave*): I don't think so.

Cornelia (*shocked*): What?! But why? Come on, Makaria, it's no big deal. I have so much, and I'm happy to share.

Makaria looks longingly at the food, but then shakes her head no.

Cornelia : Well, suit yourself. Prisca? Aquila?

Prisca starts to grab a sweet, but Aquila pulls her back.

Aquila (*sharply*): No, Cornelia. We're not hungry.

Prisca looks at Aquila puzzled. Aquila looks pointedly at Cornelia's slave. Prisca follows his glance. Cornelia's slave looks down at the ground.

Prisca : Oh! No, Cornelia. Aquila is right. We have all we need.

Cornelia : But you don't! You only have bread and some fish. You need nuts and sweets to round out your diet. Makaria! You only have that small crusty loaf of bread. Here. Let me help you!

Makaria, Prisca, Aquila: (*all at the same time*) No **Cornelia** : (*Crying*) But why!?

Cornelia's slave (*softly*): Miss?

Cornelia (*sharply*): What?

Cornelia's slave : I think it's because they think you should offer some food to me. I'm the only one without a basket, Cornelia. I carry your basket. I carry your food. I eat when you think to let me eat. I know you think you take really good care of me. I know you do, but you don't realize how often I'm hungry.

Jesus: Blessed are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

Makaria : She's famished, Cornelia. Jesus just said that those who are famished— are greatly honored. Yet you didn't offer her anything from your basket.

Cornelia : But . . . I . . .

Prisca : You just weren't thinking, were you?

Cornelia (*starting to cry*): No. I'm so sorry! I just wasn't thinking! I'm so sorry!

Prisca : It's easy to be blind when you don't have to know. When you're someone who gets to eat so much that you are actually stuffed—I think that's the word Jesus just used to describe being fed until you're full—well, it's hard to notice when others aren't the same way.

Cornelia (*looking at the crowds all around*): Oh, I feel so overwhelmed! I don't want to see! All these people are famished! There are so many of them! I don't have enough food for all of them!

Makaria (*gently*): You have enough for us. **Cornelia** : But you won't eat it!

Makaria : I think . . . if you just talked to your slave maybe you could eat together. Maybe you could even be fed together by God. Jesus said that all who are famished for food and justice would be fed.

Prisca : I'll eat if she eats. **Aquila** : Me, too.

Cornelia (*taking a deep breath and turning towards her slave*): Well, what do you think? Will you join me for dinner?

Cornelia's slave : I'd like that very much.

Cornelia pulls out the extravagance of her basket of food and passes it around, starting with her slave.

Makaria : God of the harvest, many are hungry. Many more thirst for justice. Awaken us to how we contribute to the hunger and thirst of our neighbors. Teach us to feed your people with food and justice, even as you fed your people with manna, that all may be satisfied. Amen.

The action moves back up the mountain. Peter and Andrew stand close to each other. Jesus is nearby, his eyes closed in prayer.

Peter : I don't believe it! I don't believe what I just saw!

Andrew (*yawning*): What is that, Peter?

Peter : Well, there they were. The two who were destitute, weeping, humbled, famished. They stood their ground! And now that Cornelia girl is sharing her food, and they all are laughing, and they are happy, and they all really seem to like each other.

Andrew : Cornelia shared her food?

Peter : Yeah!

Andrew : Well, you know, I kind of thought she would. **Peter** : You did?

Andrew : Well, I saw her face when her slave first decided not to follow her. Remember? When Makaria was crying and Cornelia wanted to leave? But her slave said no. And Cornelia's face looked shocked. And then angry. And she could have caused a really big scene. There were guards around, you know? She could have done something really bad to that slave. But she didn't. For just a minute . . . just a brief minute . . . she looked . . . like she had a deep, steadfast love for her slave . . . sort of like God's steadfast love. It was like she wasn't going to leave her slave or call the guards because it would have been a betrayal . . . of her slave! I think somehow Cornelia knew that!

Jesus (*opening his eyes and looking up to heaven*): Greatly honored are those who show steadfast love and mercy, for the same will be shown to them.

(*Jesus keeps his eyes open and listens to Peter and Andrew.*) **Peter** : So Cornelia was merciful?

Andrew : In a way. But so was her slave.

Peter : How do you mean?

Andrew : Well, in the end, Cornelia's slave accepted Cornelia's food. **Peter** : But first Cornelia had to repent.

Andrew : Right! So Cornelia showed mercy by not going after the guards. And Cornelia's slave showed mercy by telling Cornelia why Makaria, Prisca and Aquila would not accept Cornelia's

food. She took a great risk. She told the truth. She gave Cornelia a chance to see the error of her ways. And Cornelia did!

Peter : They both showed mercy.

Andrew : Merciful God, fill our hearts with mercy for your people. Move us to act with mercy on their behalf. Steady us to dedicate our lives to the Christ-like way of mercy. Transform us into people who show mercy, as you show mercy, that we may truly be your people. Amen.

Peter : Andrew, I feel like Jesus has been telling me to repent. Will you pray some Psalms with me?

Andrew : Sure.

Both : Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

Jesus : (*Joining them*) The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

(*Jesus keeps his eyes open and listens to Peter and Andrew.*)

Peter : Do you think I’ve done something wrong?

Andrew : It’s not what you’ve done wrong, Peter. It’s what God has done right. **Peter** : What do you mean?

Andrew : I mean, you are seeing God, are you not? Like Jacob, our forefather from the scriptures, wrestling with the angel. You’re so honest with God about how you feel. The world is not right! The world is unjust! And you want to make it just!

Jesus : Greatly honored are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (*Jesus returns to prayer as Andrew and Peter step away to talk together*) **Andrew** : I think your heart is pure, Peter.

Peter : Why do you say that?

Andrew : Because it’s not about getting everything right. It’s not about perfection. It’s about loving deeply. And you do that.

Peter : That’s why Jesus told me to feed his sheep?

Andrew : So what are you still doing up here on the mountain? His sheep are down there!

Peter : But I want to be close to Jesus! Jesus is up here!

Andrew : Jesus is down there with the crowd. If you want to be greatly honored, if you want to be pure in heart, if you want to be with Jesus, if you want to see God, then get down off this mountain and get out into that valley where God’s people are, and feed them! Do like Cornelia did! She is pure in heart now, too!

Makaria, Prisca, Aquila, Cornelia, and Cornelia’s slave are still feasting. Peter walks up to them.

Peter : Shalom.

Makaria, Prisca, Aquila, Cornelia and Cornelia’s slave : Shalom!

Cornelia’s slave : Would you like some bread? **Peter** : “I’d love some.”

Cornelia : “Please, join us.”

Peter sits down and begins to eat.

Aquila : I saw you! Before. Up front with Jesus. Were you with him on the mountain!? **Peter** : Well, I’ve been with him from the beginning . . . in the very first group, actually.

He had a couple of things to say to us privately.

Aquila : Anything we ought to know?" Maybe some strategies for resisting Rome?

Cornelia : "I am so tired of hearing how bad Rome is! They're trying to bring us peace! It's the revolts that are the problem. My dad says—"

Aquila (*cutting off Cornelia*): "Cornelia! Are we really back here again? Have you not heard anything!? Makaria's husband is gone! Our food is gone! Our land is gone!"

Cornelia : "But the Pax Romana—" **Aquila** : "—is nothing but a big fat lie!"

Prisca : "Cornelia, I know that your family has benefitted from what is called the peace of Rome—the Pax Romana. And your father is even part of the army. But peace for the Romans is nothing more than violence for the rest of us."

Cornelia : "But the whole point is not to have violence! The point is to protect you from the rabble-rousers!"

Prisca : "But that's not really how it works in the day-to-day of life, Cornelia. We already told you how our best crops go to Rome while our children are malnourished. You know about Makaria's husband. Why do you think we revolt, Cornelia? We're desperate!"

Cornelia : "But my dad would never do that! He's a really good man!"

Prisca (*comforting her*): "Cornelia, he may not know what he is doing. Or he may think he is doing the right thing. But for us, it is more than we can bear."

Cornelia : "It's more than I can bear! What am I going to do? I love my dad. I love my family. But if he's doing all these bad things, what am I supposed to do? I can't leave! I have nowhere to go."

Prisca : "Is there any chance you could talk to your dad? Tell him what you have learned here?"

Cornelia : "Are you kidding? I'm the daughter. The youngest daughter! I have no right to talk to my father that way."

Jesus : Blessed are people who are makers and maintainers of peace, for they will be called children of God.

Cornelia : "How could he say that? Caesar is the son of God! He's going to get into really big trouble! Somebody needs to warn him!"

Peter : "Oh, he knows what he's doing, all right. I told you. This is all part of the strategy. All part of the movement. We're going to overthrow Rome!"

Makaria : "Wait a minute, Peter. Didn't he say, 'Blessed are the peacemakers'? That doesn't sound like a movement to overthrow an empire."

Cornelia's slave : "I think it is, actually. But in a different way than it sounds. What would happen if all of us—me, Cornelia, you, Prisca, Aquila—what if everyone who is here in this valley really believed we were the Children of God? Not Caesar. What if we really believed we received God's inheritance, God's property, God's own name, even God's status? We wouldn't have to be afraid anymore. We could tell the truth and know that, whatever happened, we had the honor of God with us. That's how it felt when I told you the truth about me. Like I really did belong to God. Like I really did have the right to speak the truth of the injustice I was experiencing. And you listened."

Cornelia : "So you're saying that if I trust that I am the . . . oh, this is really hard to say . . . that I am the child of God' . . . I can't say it! I can't!"

Aquila : “It sounds like blasphemy, I know.”

Makaria : “But it’s not, Cornelia. It’s what gives us courage to live in true peace with one another.” **Cornelia** : “I’m scared.”

Makaria : “I am, too Cornelia. But I have to tell you, if you talk to your father, if you tell him what you have learned, if he listens to you . . . well . . . if my husband is still alive, maybe your dad will let him come back to me.”

Cornelia : “I could make that happen?”

Cornelia’s slave : “God could make that happen through you.”

Cornelia : “I’ll do it! I promise. I’ll do anything to help you get your husband back.”

Cornelia’s slave : “God of peace, we long for the wholeness that your shalom promises to us and to the whole world. Teach us how to make peace, a peace brought not by war but by justice, to all your people. Help us to follow our sovereign Jesus Christ, our Prince of Peace. Amen.”

Jesus and Andrew are sitting quietly together in prayer.

Andrew : “Blessed God, we give you thanks that you are always with us in times of trouble, sorrow, and joy. Open our hearts that we may do justice in your name. Amen.”

Peter comes huffing up the mountain and sits down, oblivious to the fact that they are praying.

Peter : “Oh, wow. Oh, wow! Did you see what just happened?! That was amazing!”

Andrew : “What was it?”

Peter : “Cornelia! That girl is one tough cookie. She’s going to confront her father, the Roman guard! She’s going to ask for Makaria’s husband back! She’s really going to do it!”

Jesus : “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Peter : That doesn’t sound too promising for Cornelia. She could be persecuted trying to help create peace. That doesn’t seem right.

Andrew : Jesus is telling us that people have always been harassed for trying to do the right thing, but we are blessed if that happens, and we’ll be rewarded in heaven even if not on earth.

Action moves back down the mountain

Makaria : “Well, that was the best afternoon of my life.”

Aquila : “Yeah, me too.”

Prisca (*teasing*): “I told you so!”

Aquila (*laughing*): “Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m really glad we came. You were right.”

The group finishes packing up, then looks at each other, not sure of what to do next.

Makaria : “I think we should say a prayer for Cornelia.”

Prisca : “Yes, let’s lay hands on her and pray for her together.”

Cornelia kneels, while the others lay their hands on her head and her shoulders.

Makaria : “Fill Cornelia with your Spirit, Creator God, and speak to her through your word, revealed in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.”

Cornelia, Aquila, Prisca, and Cornelia’s slave : “Amen!” *As Cornelia rises, Peter, Andrew, and Jesus come toward them.*

Peter : Cornelia, wait, we're worried about you. I don't think you understand what could happen to you if you talk to your father and start living as a child of God.

Cornelia : "Well I do! I know what you are asking me to do, and I know what the consequences could be. My family. My friends. My livelihood . . . maybe even my life! Peter, I know the risk. I'm doing it anyway."

Jesus : "Blessed are you when you put your honor on the line for my sake." **Cornelia** : "See!"

Peter : "But it's too much! If you were my daughter . . . I just feel too responsible. Let us do it. Let us talk to your father." we'll convince him."

Cornelia (*laughing*): "You don't know my father."

Andrew : "We know that, Cornelia, but we just think it's too great a risk for you. Your honor is at stake."

Jesus : "Shame on you whenever all people speak well of you, for in this way, their ancestors treated false prophets."

Cornelia : "See! It's not about my so-called 'honor.' It's not about my dad's so-called 'honor'! It's about justice!"

Peter : "But she can't do it alone!"

Cornelia's slave : "She won't be alone. I'll be with her." **Makaria** : "And I'll be with her in spirit."

Prisca and Aquila : "So will we."

Andrew (*to Peter*): "And so will we."

Jesus : "I am with you always, even until the end of the age."

Cornelia : "See? I'll be okay. I mean, even if I'm not 'okay,' I'll be okay. I have my God, and I have my slave." You know, I've been with you my whole life. But I don't have any idea what your name is. I'm sorry. Will you tell me?"

Cornelia's slave (*pointing to Jesus*): "My dear child. He knows. He knows my name." (*to Jesus*) "Don't you?"

Jesus : "Her name . . . is Christian."